

*Theologies of the Multitude
for the Multitudes*

The Legacy of Kwok Pui-lan

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*Edited by
Rita Nakashima Brock and Tat-siong Benny Liew*

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Rita Nakashima Brock
Tat-siong Benny Liew
June 2021

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Introduction:
Re-Imagining Im-Possibilities All-Together?

Rita Nakashima Brock and Tat-siong Benny Liew

Throughout her remarkable career, Kwok Pui Lan has demonstrated an uncanny ability to work with a multitude of people. Her contributions to feminist theological scholarship and to Asian and Asian American studies of religion and theology are extraordinary both for her publications and for her decades of involvement in grassroots movements that have become enduring organizations. The two most obvious organizations are PANAAWTM (Pacific, Asian, and North American Asian Women in Theology and Ministry) and ATSI (Asian Theological Summer Institute). Her ability to move among and across different networks of people in the Global North and Global South is extraordinary as she engages with different habits of thought and praxis between ministry and the academy and across academic fields beyond her own discipline of theology. As a result, she has edited books on the Anglican Church, on postcolonial practices of ministry, on Asian and Asian American women's theologies and religions, and on the "Third World."¹ In addition, Kwok is an international scholar of diverse movements with published works on Occupy Wall Street and the protest movement in Hong Kong.² As Helen Jin Kim points

¹ Ian T. Douglas and Kwok Pui-lan, eds., *Beyond Colonial Anglicanism: The Anglican Communion in the Twenty-First Century* (New York: Church Publishing, 2001); Kwok Pui-lan, Judith A. Berling, and Jenny Plane Te Paa, eds., *Anglican Women on Church & Mission* (New York: Morehouse, 2012); Kwok Pui-lan and Stephen Burns, eds., *Postcolonial Practice of Ministry: Leadership, Liturgy, and Interfaith Engagement* (Lanham: Lexington, 2016); Kwok Pui-lan, ed., *Asian and Asian American Women in Religion and Theology: Embodying Knowledge* (Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2020); Kwok Pui-lan, ed., *Hope Abundant: Third World and Indigenous Women's Theology* (Maryknoll: Orbis, 2010).

² Joerg Rieger and Kwok Pui-lan, *Occupy Religion: Theology of the Multitude* (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 2012); Kwok Pui-lan and Francis Ching-wah Yip,

out in her essay, Kwok shows us that working with different populations and movements is important for effective, lasting change, which Kwok accomplishes with her deft negotiation of many roles as “Theologian, Educator, Mentor, Public Voice, Prophet, Spiritual Guide, Pioneer, Organizer.”

Occupy Wall Street offers an example of how, in this book, we are using the term “multitude.” It was inspired by Arab Spring and spread internationally within weeks of the launch of the first encampment on September 17, 2011, in New York City. Deliberately eschewing charismatic leaders, it was decentralized, globally networked, and focused on “inclusion and groping toward consensus.” Multitudes of this movement continued to pursue new strategies long after police forces destroyed the visible encampments.³ For example, artist and lifelong activist Boots Riley of Occupy Oakland wrote and directed the feature film “Sorry to Bother You” in 2018⁴ and the current chair of the progressive caucus in the US House of Representatives, Pramila Jayapal (D-WA), announced her run for office at the former location of Occupy Seattle, which she supported.⁵ Occupiers in Boston began to work with and through existing community organizations to push for change in local housing and public transportation. In the words of one such Occupier, “Once folks got out of the tedium, you know, of needing to protect that space and maintain that space and the things you need to do to run a small city, you know, keeping people fed, keeping it sanitized, people were able to focus on broader issues.”⁶ From the Occupy Movement, organized activities included the 99

eds., *The Hong Kong Protest and Political Theology* (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 2021).

³ Douglas Rushkoff, “Think Occupy Wall St. Is a Phase? You Don’t Get It,” *CNN*, October 11, 2011, <https://www.cnn.com/2011/10/05/opinion/rushkoff-occupy-wall-street/index.html>.

⁴ Amy Goodman, “Boots Riley’s Dystopian Satire ‘Sorry to Bother You’ Is an Anti-Capitalist Rallying Cry for Workers,” *Democracy Now*, July 17, 2018, https://www.democracynow.org/2018/7/17/sorry_to_bother_you_boots_rileys.

⁵ Astra Taylor, “Occupy Wall Street’s Legacy Runs Deeper Than You Think,” *Economic Hardship Reporting Project*, December 17, 2019, <https://economichardship.org/2019/12/occupy-wall-streets-legacy-runs-deeper-than-you-think/>.

⁶ Cited in Tovia Smith, “Occupy Boston Holds on as Other Camps Close,” *National Public Radio*, February 9, 2012, <https://www.npr.org/2012/02/09/146657528/occupy-boston-holds-on-as-other-camps-close>.

Percent Spring, Occupy Homes, Occupy the Hood, and Occupy the Dream.⁷

Multitude is a word popularized by Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, meaning “an internally different, multiple social subject whose constitution and action is based not on identity or unity” but “on what it has in common.”⁸ Hardt and Negri note that multitude can be present “both within and against” powers of domination, even as they assert that “the challenge of the multitude is the challenge of democracy.”⁹ While we build upon their work in this collection, we need to do so with nuance, as Kwok and other critics have shown.¹⁰ Specifically, our authors variously address three huge lacunae in Hardt and Negri’s proposal regarding multitude. First, Hardt and Negri state that racial difference should have room to express itself freely without becoming the basis of determining a power differential, but their emphasis on the eighteenth-century (particularly the French and the American Revolutions) as “the North Star... to guide...political desires and practices” of the multitude shows that they have little sense or sensibility when it comes to matters of race, despite their acknowledgment of the “exclusion of the nonwhite.”¹¹ Second, Hardt and Negri demonstrate the same dismissal of gender by including it as a key component of multitude and questioning the normalization of the male body while lifting up models for multitude that are primarily male.¹² The biblical David, for instance, functions for them as an exemplary figure to imagine “the multitude as champion of asymmetrical combat, immaterial workers who become a new kind of combatants.”¹³ When Hardt and Negri think about David and power asymmetrically, their focus is solely on two men (David and

⁷ Rieger and Kwok, *Occupy Religion*, 32, 37, 60.

⁸ Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, *Multitude: War and Democracy in the Age of Empire* (New York: Penguin, 2004), 100.

⁹ Hardt and Negri, *Multitude*, 100–101.

¹⁰ For sample critiques of Hardt and Negri’s work on the multitude, see Ayça Çubukçu, “Review of *Multitude: War and Democracy in the Age of Empire* by Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri,” *The Arab Studies Journal* 13/14 (Fall 2005–Spring 2006): 168–73; Samir Amin, “Contra Hardt and Negri: Multitude or Generalized Proletarianization,” *Monthly Review* 66 (November 2014): 25–36.

¹¹ Hardt and Negri, *Multitude*, 241.

¹² See, for example, Hardt and Negri, *Multitude*, 157, 199, 355.

¹³ Hardt and Negri, *Multitude*, 50.

Goliath); completely off of their radar screen, it seems, is how David rises to kingship using conventional military power and uses his status to rape Bathsheba, the wife of an exemplary officer in the military he commands. Third, Hardt and Negri pay no attention to religion and theology when they talk about the multitude, even as they draw examples from religious texts while ignoring scholarship that troubles the valorizing narratives involved and simultaneously announcing that today's multitudes have no need of God.¹⁴

While Hardt and Negri propose multitude as an emerging global class formation against the empire of globalized capitalism, the concerns they dismiss – gender, race, and religion/theology – are even more pressing now as #MeToo, #BlackLivesMatter, and #StopAsianHate have become the largest, intersecting multitudes over and against a White Supremacist Christian nationalist multitude. Gender, race, and religion/theology as dimensions of multitude are precisely what Kwok's global and postcolonial scholarship¹⁵ and the work of the writers in this collection are all about and what are most needed in this historical moment, as the world struggles with a global resurgence of fascist forces.

One hesitation that many have raised about movements of multitudes is their continuity or durability. Patchen Markell proposes through his reading of Hannah Arendt that we can talk about power not in terms of "power over" but in terms of "power to" or "power after."¹⁶ According to Markell, Arendt focuses on power as something that follows and outlasts action ("power after") rather than as something that precedes and enables action ("power to"). Power, in Arendt's own words, "keeps people together after the fleeting moment of action has passed."¹⁷ However, attaching power to the aftermath of a movement uprising elides the reality that such

¹⁴ Hardt and Negri, *Multitude*, 159; Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, *Empire* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2000), 396.

¹⁵ See, for example, Kwok Pui-lan, *Chinese Women and Christianity, 1860-1927* (Atlanta: Scholars, 1992); Kwok Pui-lan, *Introducing Asian Feminist Theology* (Cleveland: Pilgrim, 2000); Kwok Pui-lan, *Postcolonial Imagination and Feminist Theology* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2005); Kwok Pui-lan, *Globalization, Gender, and Peacebuilding: The Future of Interfaith Dialogue* (New York: Paulist, 2012); Kwok, *Asian and Asian American Women in Religion and Theology*.

¹⁶ Patchen Markell, "The Moment Has Passed: Power after Arendt," in *Radical Future Pasts: Untimely Political Theory*, eds. Romand Cole, Mark Reinhardt, and George Shulman (Lexington: University of Kentucky, 2014), 113–43.

¹⁷ Cited in Markell, "The Moment Has Passed," 127.

uprisings have long periods of formation through community relationships that precede a public movement, relationships that James C. Scott calls “infrapolitics,” which prepare the way for the uprisings, sometimes over generations. After an uprising they persist to inspire new strategies in the face of official resistance as “hidden discourses of resistance.”¹⁸ He asserts that oppressed groups cannot be explained or understood in the discourses of ruling powers, which remain ignorant of what is deliberately hidden beneath public acts of acquiescence and accommodation. Hidden and enduring transcripts of resistance transmitted through community relationships sustain energies for mobilization that can rapidly build capacity, form, and move multitudes—what Hardt and Negri call “constituent power.”¹⁹ We see this in the Asian American Movement. Although *Gidra*, the monthly newspaper known as the “Voice of the Asian American Movement,” only ran for five years (1969-1974),²⁰ Asian American activism did not become voiceless and cease in 1974. Instead, it continues to flourish half a century later, just as it was made possible by earlier activism that led to its emergence.²¹

Kwok Pui Lan has been a crucial, “power to” scholar who emerged in the early 1990s to lift up hidden discourses of Chinese women and who opened avenues for Asian and Asian American women to build new theologies, many of whom are contributors to this festschrift. Helen Kim anticipates the possibilities of Kwok’s “power after” in her essay when she calls for archival documentation of the contributions that Asian American female intellectuals and ministers produce as a follow-up to this Festschrift. We see examples of both “power to” and “power after” in other contributions to this Festschrift. Grace Kao in her essay talks about 12 Black US women who, after coining the term “reproductive justice” in 1994, formed the “Women of African Descent for Reproductive Justice” (WADRJ), which generated the SisterSong

¹⁸ James C. Scott, *Domination and the Arts of Resistance: Hidden Transcripts* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1990).

¹⁹ Hardt and Negri, *Multitude*, 22.

²⁰ Cathy J. Schlund-Vials, “Introduction: Crisis, Conundrum, and Critique,” in *Flashpoints for Asian American Studies*, ed. Cathy J. Schlund-Vials (New York: Fordham University Press, 2018), 1.

²¹ William Gow, “Renee Tajima-Pena, Series Producer. *Asian Americans*,” *The American Historical Review* 126, no. 1 (March 2021): 227–229, <https://doi.org/10.1093/ahr/rhab069>.

Women of Color Reproductive Justice collective in 1997, formed by 16 organizations representing not only African American, but also Asian American, Latina, and Native American women. The shift from reproductive “choice” to “justice” was a significant “power to” moment that has had a significant “power after” impact.²² In his Asian American Muslim theology essay, Martin Nguyen proposes the power “of the after,” using his mother’s story to read Hagar’s story in a way that does not focus on the displacement of Hagar or what she lost when she left Abraham’s household but on what she achieved. Just as Nguyen’s mother is able to live a full life and raise a family after her arrival in the US, Hagar, according to Islamic literature, also established a flourishing settlement in Mecca. The process of “power to” as a resource for “power after” is, Anne Joh suggests in her essay for this Festschrift, “not just discovering suppressed voices; it is the work of reaching into unofficial and often forgotten archives of our peoples and also the archives of lost dreams and hopes” that can guide the intentions of our work. With “power to” we never know exactly what our attempts, intentions, or actions may bring about, or how and when such work can turn into “power after” for multitudinous movements.

Theologies of the Multitude

This Festschrift honors Kwok Pui Lan for her prescient, pioneering, critical, and constructive work for the multitude. We have assembled scholars of that multitude, connected by liberative, democratic, justice-oriented relationships and work, who have engaged with and learned from Kwok’s scholarship. They represent not only various disciplinary and interdisciplinary approaches and theological views in their work but also different genders, races, and religious traditions. This complexity, we suggest, both allows for incongruencies and intersecting collaborations. By incongruencies, we assert that multitude does not mean privileges, prejudices, or power differentials disappear; by collaborations, we mean reading these essays as an opportunity to consider theological propositions

²² Danielle M. Pacia, “Reproductive Rights vs. Reproductive Justice: Why the Difference Matters in Bioethics,” *Harvard Law Petrie-Flom Center Bill of Health* 3 (November 2020), <https://blog.petrieflom.law.harvard.edu/2020/11/03/reproductive-rights-justice-bioethics/#:~:text=Essentially%2C%20the%20reproductive%20rights%20framework,expansive%2C%20intersectional%2C%20and%20holistic>.

in relation to multiple understandings that stretch us to further work across differences to disrupt settled positions, to dismantle systems of oppression, and to enable work that supports justice and the flourishing of multitudes.

This collection is organized in reverse alphabetical English order by family name—beginning with Y—since the essays can be read in a variety of orders, such as by traditional academic fields, primary foci, or dominant themes that link certain essays together. In this introduction, we will note some of these linkages via their contributions about race, gender, and religion/theology for the multitude as a way to think about how they intersect, challenge, and reinforce each other and multiply theologies of the multitude for multitudes.

Race/Ethnicity, Binaries, and Boundaries

Two significant issues appear repeatedly within this Festschrift: the problem of binary thinking and the instability of boundary, especially, though not exclusively, regarding racial/ethnic relations in the US. In her essay, Gale A. Yee argues that one has to go beyond a binary framework of ancient Babylonia and Yehud to realize in one's reading of the exilic history of the Jewish people the existence of not only greater ethnic and geographical diversities but also different understandings of Jewishness. Her essay illuminates how readings of the Hebrew Bible reveal our contemporary struggles with narrow limits that confine complex identities.

While most of the contributors to this Festschrift are of Asian descent, they are well aware that Asia or Asian is a manifold umbrella term, or, in Nguyen's essay, a "bricolage." William Yoo points out in his contribution, by way of Erika Lee, that Asian America represents 24 ethnic groups, not to mention differences in things such as national origin and immigration status. Nami Kim's understanding of Asian/American theology also points to a multitude with internal diversities in terms of what Mary Foskett calls "the discursive network of multiple Asian American scholarly voices." Kim also acknowledges the problematic dominance of East Asians in Asian America. An emphasis on Asian American panethnicity may, for Peter Phan, readily cover over too much at

times.²³ Age also involves difference, as Christine Hong asserts in her essay about how the intentional cultivation of an intergenerational community among Asian and Asian North American women takes “blood, sweat, and tears.” Jung Ha Kim recounts in her “letter” to Kwok how differences in ethnicity and nativity generated distrust and distance in their early interactions. Michele A. Gonzalez reminds us that Latinx, like Asian, is also a pan-ethnic term that includes a multitude of cultures, languages, and national origins. She capitalizes on the conglomerate and, at times, conflictual construction of these pan-ethnic groups to push for a greater connection between Asian Americans and Latinx, pointing out in the process that there are Latin American and Caribbean people of Asian descent as well as many parallel experiences that Asian Americans and Latinx share.

Various diversities within a pan-ethnic group signals that different assemblages are not only possible and probable, but also inevitable. Joh in her essay notes, “We cannot in all honesty speak of the “West” or the “East” precisely because geopolitical histories cannot be so easily sliced and diced.” Mrinalini Sebastian and J. Jayakaran Sebastian in their contribution offer A. T. P. Williams’ insight that “wide divergence is not the same as radical contradiction.” We see this distinction between incongruence and contradiction being played out in this Festschrift, when, for example, Joh and Yoo share Gonzalez’s problematization of the black-and-white racial framework of the US; Yoo focuses on how Asian Americans often find themselves in the “cracks and fissures” of that binary racial framework and hence face the need to develop a “triple-consciousness.” Rather than pursuing whiteness by participating in anti-Black racism, Yoo follows the examples of Grace Lee Boggs and Syngman Rhee of standing in solidarity with Blacks in a primarily white-dominant society for greater justice. In fact, Jung Ha Kim and Keun-joo Christine Pae refer to African American scholars as particularly influential to their scholarship—what Kim, following Cathy Park Hong, calls “family trade.” Kim turns to W. E. B. Du Bois while Pae finds important Layli Maparyan’s assertion that various feminisms, for example, Asian American, Black, Latinx, and

²³ As Nami Kim makes clear in her essay to this Festschrift, she is following David Palumbo-Liu in using the solidus between “Asian” and “American” to highlight the unstable relations between these two terms.

Indigenous feminisms, are a "colonial legacy of compartmentalization" and "false demarcation." Joh and Pae argue for a transnational feminist network that recognizes how various racialized and genderized identities are co-constitutive and intersecting.

These internal intersections among contributors to this Festschrift raise many provocative questions, including the suggestion that even Yoo's "*triple* consciousness" is still too limiting. For example, why, Gonzalez wonders, have Latinx scholars not written much about Latinx of African and indigenous mixed descent (*zambos*)? We may also wonder what the adjacent whiteness of Asian Americans may imply for solidarity with other communities of color.

If intra-group diversities and "racial triangulation," a term Nguyen borrows from Claire Jean Kim, can encourage both competitions and connections, assumed differentiations among various races or various ethnicities *and* between race and ethnicity become fluid. This is indeed what Gonzalez advocates in her use of Linda Martín Alcoff's category of "ethnorace." However, ethnorace still does not address Jung Ha Kim's concerns. Out of her experience directing an "Asian American" community service center, which included Somali refugee youth, she suggests that our "experiential" or "embodied knowledge" can help us "organize and work together" on the basis of "commonly shared cause(s)" without the limitation of racial, ethnic, or ethnoracial categories. Kim's specific mention of Yuri Kochiyama and Grace Lee Boggs shows that movements of multitudes are seldom racially monolithic, even if a movement is galvanized by a specific race. This became obvious during the pandemic as Black Lives Matter burgeoned into a multiracial movement.

Contributors to this volume are well aware that race, ethnicity, or ethnorace cannot be considered in isolation from other identity factors. Adopting Lisa Schirch's use of the word "ecology" to talk about the problem of violent extremism, Eleazar Fernandez captures the need for holistic evaluation. To be holistic, we cannot talk simply about interconnections despite difference. We must also talk about the interlocking dynamics of oppression, which, as Rose Wu reminds us, also exists in a multitude. Nami Kim discusses, therefore, how those of religious traditions outside of Protestantism

are often feminized and racialized as in need of “missionary reform” (read: colonization). What Pae calls “relations of ruling” in her essay are identified in Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza’s essay as “kyriarchy,” because terms such as patriarchy or racism do not necessarily draw attention to interlocking oppressions and fail to capture how people are differently located on a power-laden “pyramid of interwoven structural discriminations and oppressions.”

Surrounding all these suggestions to rearrange the deck, reassemble the groups, or rename the dynamics is the issue of boundary. The troubling of boundaries may have something to do with the fact that Kwok has not only called religion the “original globalizer,” as Nami Kim points out, but is herself a trailblazer in ways that go beyond crossing geography.²⁴ As Hong observes in her essay, Kwok’s interdisciplinary scholarship “effectively dialogues with partners across different traditions, generations, racializations, and histories.” Referring to a 1987 article in which Kwok claims for herself and Hong Kong (her place of birth) a “boundary existence,” M. Shawn Copeland describes boundary in her contribution to this volume as a place of both limit and vitality—and an explicit methodology where Kwok chooses to remain always open to “whomever is ‘unintelligible’ in a given cultural, religious, socio-political context.” In using Kwok’s transnational, interdisciplinary lens, Boyung Lee challenges the use of white Christian church practices as the primary context for practical theology: “The rise in opioid addiction, poverty, and gun violence, and the lowering of life expectancy for the American white population is a sign that [the context of our work] may be drifting toward something closer to the Global South as globalization has exported most of the jobs.” A failure to shift our context and framework, Lee continues, “has made [practical theology] seriously out of strategies and ideas for an increasingly globalized, technological, environmentally threatened, post-colonial world.”

Whether it is Wu’s challenge that we transgress traditional theological assumptions and norms of gender and sexuality or

²⁴ See, for example, Kwok Pui-lan, *Discovering the Bible in the Non-Biblical World* (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1995); Kwok Pui-lan, Don H. Compier, and Joerg Rieger, eds., *Empire and the Christian Tradition: New Readings of Classical Theologians* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2007); Kwok Pui-lan, Cecilia González-Andrieu, and Dwight N. Hopkins, eds., *Teaching Global Theologies: Power and Praxis* (Waco: Baylor University Press, 2015).

Russell Jeung's blurring of sociology and theology, we sense an energy driving many contributors to want to burst through existing confines and explore new ground. Like Pae, Hong sees catalogs and categories as an imperial impetus in order to establish norms and hierarchies, even if "[o]ur lived experiences are not neatly categorized and bordered" but "messy and beautiful." Perhaps the most vivid image of this boundary transgression is found in Rudy Busto and Jane Iwamura's essay, which literally talks about space travel and planetary citizenship. It should be noted, however, that Busto and Iwamura are careful to point out that boundary transgressions may also be a colonial project for power and financial profit, especially since the history of space travel has not only been deeply motivated by imperial competitions between empires but also racially inflected, so we must balance the urge to transcend and the need to historicize. After all, in the US context, the word "alien" has often been used to refer to immigrants and "undocumented" migrant workers of color, as well as to imaginary life forms from other planets. We can think of the nineteenth-century orientalist, Percival Lowell, who, after moving from a career in Asian Studies to astronomy, used Asians, in particular Japanese, to talk about the aliens that he believed could be found on Mars as if the two were parallel or similar.²⁵ In Lowell's mind, Asia and space were both exotic places to romanticize and Orientalize.

Fernandez, in his essay on violent extremism, issues a call for balance similar to the one delivered by Busto and Iwamura. Although he lists an insistence on "sharp boundaries" as a characteristic of religious fundamentalism, he also critiques globalization for moving the world into a "global pillage" rather than a "global village." As we have learned from the multitude that stormed and pillaged the US Capitol on 6 January 2021, the desire for "liberty" without constraint can actually turn into a lust for domination that hinders the democratic future of US society. During the pandemic of COVID-19, we learned that understanding democratic freedom as the absence of limits on when and where one wants to go can be lethally problematic, just as the absence of limits

²⁵ Timothy J. Yamamura, "Fictions of Science, American Orientalism, and the Alien/Asian of Percival Lowell," in *Dis-Orienting Planets: Racial Representation of Asia in Science Fiction*, ed. Isiah Lavender III (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2017), 89-101.

on wealth generates global suffering. During the pandemic, we saw massive increases of wealth in the superrich and the creation of new billionaires. Joh observes, “As massive devastation is wreaked upon vulnerable people and creation by a privileged few who accumulate unimaginable wealth and resources, we are faced with an unprecedented crisis of hunger, forced migration, disease, and death, and – out of this mix – defiance and violence.”

At the same time, people’s need to immigrate or to seek asylum as refugees is a reality explicitly mentioned in some essays and implicitly assumed in others within this volume. Both of Kwok’s sermons analyzed in Helen Kim’s essay, based respectively on Luke 10 and Acts 2, and both of the narratives that Nguyen provides about his parents, as well as his use of Hagar’s “exilic journey,” have to do with people journeying and moving to a place where they don’t find welcoming hospitality. Gonzalez quotes Alcoff that ““Immigrants are today the most reviled group in America.” Nami Kim suggests that such an intense focus against immigrants enables the expunging from US history of its settler colonialism, including the genocide of indigenous inhabitants and the enslavement of black bodies. Grace Kao’s contribution on “rethinking surrogacy” is helpful in unpacking these multitudinous complexities of boundary, agency, and exploited labor. Kao points out that any ethical consideration of this complicated issue requires careful contextualization that attends to the specificity of the involved parties (including their socioeconomic status, race, and sexuality). Without this kind of careful contextualization, one will not be able to parse the power differential and to assess properly if a boundary is there for exclusionary or protective purposes.

Worlds of Religion and “World Religions”

One of the boundary issues that a number of essays pursue concerns the categorization of what counts as “religion.” Kwok charged western imperialism with limiting the study of religion by isolating or atomizing it as an object of study, as Phan notes in his essay about her “theology of religious difference.” Questions about religion as a category and about religious plurality are raised, for example, by both Gonzalez and Hong when they observe that Kwok

has long critiqued theological education as “a colonial project.”²⁶ Likewise, Sebastian and Sebastian discuss the need to evaluate the politics of knowledge: namely, “how do we know what we know and what are the connections between knowledge?” What Pae says about transnational feminist knowledge is also applicable to religious and theological knowledge: the entire process of production and dissemination must be critically analyzed. Phan observes, “Kwok moves the discussion of religious pluralism away from the well-worn triple paradigm of exclusivism, inclusivism, and pluralism and focuses rather on the plight of women all over the world as the starting point for a theology of religion.”

Russell Jeung in his essay provides an Asian American understanding of religion as “familism” and faults the narrowing of religion to a matter of personal belief that is set over and against “secular.” We would also note that religion is set over and against “superstition,” which is how Asian ancestral veneration has often been described. Nami Kim, in addition to sharing some of Jeung’s concerns, brings up the problematic Christian construction of “world religions” as a form of othering. This interrogation of terms for religious pluralism is seen in several essays: Nguyen’s query about the almost complete monopolization of the term “theology” by Christian scholars; Lee’s challenge to the white Christian hegemony that defines the context of practical theology; and Hong’s concern with “interreligious solidarities.” In Busto and Iwamura’s protest against the Christian domination of astrotheology and their talk about space travel, they seek to expose and explode a western—aka white—definition of religion.

The questions the authors in this collection raise about categorizing religions and avoiding complicity with the colonial religion project challenge scholars of religion and theology to reconsider our resources, repertoire, and objects, as well as the directions for and intentions of our work. Out of her commitment to disrupt both East Asian domination and Christian hegemony, Nami Kim argues in her essay that Asian/American scholars of theology must come to see the connections between anti-Asian and anti-Muslim practices and sentiments. She advocates a “relational”

²⁶ See especially Kwok Pui-lan, “2011 Presidential Address: Empire and the Study of Religion,” *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 80 (2012): 285–303.

approach to broaden the scope of our study to research and write about Islam and Islamophobia, Palestine, Zionism, and settler colonialism. Her argument is persuasive because the country with the largest Muslim population, Indonesia, is in Asia, and similar developments are already taking place in Asian American studies.²⁷ Similar calls for greater connections are made by Gonzalez between Latinx and Asian Americans; by Hong across various generations, religions, and minoritized communities of color; by Yoo between African Americans and Asian Americans; and by Pae on behalf of a transnational and transgenerational feminist network of solidarity.

Contributors attend also to particular ethical issues that challenge the multitude: violent extremism by Fernandez; surrogacy by Kao; and matters of sex and sexuality by Wu. Nyugen's Asian American Muslim theology is a challenge to the Euro-American academy's "traditional" disciplinary classifications and a call to expand scholarly work in religion and theology in different directions. To resist or undo kyriarchy, Schüssler-Fiorenza talks about the need for interpreters to draw from the experiences, wisdoms, and intellectual traditions of women.

Re-imagining and Storytelling

Without denying that religion can be one of the many driving forces that lead to violent extremism, Fernandez underscores that religion "provides transcendent orientation and 'antisystemic' force" that, borrowing Paul Knitter's words, can offer "vision and energy" to build a "global civil society." Vision is, of course, about creativity to imagine and re-imagine. The importance of "re-imagining" – a term first coined for a World Council of Churches 1993 global conference held in Minneapolis of 2000 attendees from an emerging global feminist multitude²⁸ – can be seen in Copeland's choice to highlight three markers in Kwok's theological method: "resignifying gender, requeering sexuality, and redoing theology."

²⁷ Evyn Lê Espiritu, "Vexed Solidarities: Vietnamese Israelis and the Question of Palestine," *Literature Interpretation Theory* 29 (2018): 8-28; Quynh Nhu Le, *Unsettled Solidarities: Asian and Indigenous Cross-Representations in the Americas* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2019).

²⁸ Ha_Qohelet, "Re-Imagining, or, The Face of God," The Women's Center at Louisville Seminary, March 29, 2011, <https://wimminwiselpts.wordpress.com/tag/re-imagining-1993/>. Both Kwok and Rita Nakashima Brock spoke at the event.

As shown in Phan's careful tracing of the development of Kwok's "theology of religious difference," re-imagining is actually a rather constant emphasis in Kwok's theology. Besides Phan, other contributors to this Festschrift—including Copeland, Jeung, and Pae—have referred to Kwok's 2005 volume, *Postcolonial Imagination and Feminist Theology*, to talk about her threefold delineation of imagination (historical, dialogical, and diasporic). However, the centrality of imagination in Kwok's theological reflection, as Gonzalez points out, can already be seen in her 1989 article, "Discovering the Bible in the Non-Biblical World."²⁹ Imagination is key to what Hong calls "theo-creativity," which she elucidates with the question, "What if?" As Sebastian and Sebastian's contribution on "occupy imagination" points out, imagination can be driven by various desires and emotions as well as driving different principles and projects. According to Gonzalez, Nami Kim, and Yoo, Kwok's emphasis on re-imagining is always and all about reordering the established order. If we want to follow Busto and Iwamura's discussion of space travel, we can say Kwok's re-imagining is occupied by a desire to reach for a different and better world.

Busto and Iwamura mention science fiction, which Donna J. Haraway refers to as "SF" (signifying "science fiction, speculative fabulation, string figures" and, even, "secret feminist") to talk about the importance of imagination in the study of both humanities and the sciences.³⁰ Closely linked to this emphasis on imagination is Nguyen's prioritizing of storytelling in his Asian American Muslim theology. For him, storytelling is "one particular expressive and experiential mode of the imagination." In addition, he proposes that there are a "multitude of stories" which can be shared to help constitute a multitude with a compiled dream. Nguyen is among several contributors who talk about the importance of stories. Just as Nguyen shares the stories of his parents, Gonzalez begins her essay with a story of her own experience and then goes on to remind us that "one of the many insights from Kwok Pui-lan's work is the importance of autobiography." Similarly, Pae credits Kwok for introducing "'the image of the storyteller who selects pieces,

²⁹ Kwok Pui-lan, "Discovering the Bible in the Non-Biblical World," *Semeia* 47 (1989): 25–42.

³⁰ Donna J. Haraway, "SF: Science Fiction, Speculative Fabulation, String Figures, So Far," *Ada: A Journal of Gender, New Media, and Technology* 3 (2013), <https://adanewmedia.org/2013/11/issue3-haraway/>.

fragments, and legends from her cultural and historical memory to weave together tales that are passed from generation to generation.” Like Nguyen, Pae also stresses the “interconnections” that stories can create within a person via heart, mind, and body, as well as among people. Pae is clear, however, that this happens because stories are affective and hence effective. It is by feeling stories that we become connected with ourselves and with others. We see this also in Wu’s contribution; the transformation of her own theological assumptions about sex and sexuality involved meeting the shemale escort called “Little White Fox” and then being moved by her hearing and reading of his/her stories.

Each of the authors utilize multiple means to address how they understand multitude and why they speak about and to multitudes, with some leaning more into story while others use the discourses of their guilds to challenge the hegemony of reigning white paradigms. We hope readers of this Festschrift will be moved when they read, for example, Jung Ha Kim’s “letter” to Kwok or Nyugen’s family stories, which explicitly interrogate the convention of defensive, abstract, wordy, academic writing styles and their fractionated guilds. In the tensions among the discursive strategies used by contributors in this collection are challenges not only to the intentions and audiences of writing strategies, but also to the limitations and hierarchies of how fields are understood. Busto and Iwamura, recalling the work of the late Steff San Buenaventura, declare that Asian American religious studies should “behold and capture . . . religious imagination across time and space.” If Nguyen is correct that “storytelling arguably lies at the heart of what it means to be human” and if storytelling is a particular mode and manifestation of imagination, would we not have to make some changes, for instance, to Pae’s employment of “God-talk” as the popular shorthand for theology? Hong asks, why is the focus on “the tangible and intangible experience of life lived together in messy and complicated ways” limited to the subdiscipline in *practical* theology, rather than on scholarly work in general.

For Multitudes

The words “for multitudes” in the title signifies that we affirm the power of people to grasp complex ideas and identities, including a capacity to receive and produce knowledge. There is no movement if we and the authors of these essays, as academic professionals, are

not moving with and in the multitudes. These two simple words, “for multitudes,” is our invitation, therefore, to our readers to join us in an on-going conversation, so that, as editors and contributors, we can learn from readers as they test what is being urged and enacted in this collection in their own lives. We are convinced as editors that theological work must be done alongside actual movements and the material struggles of multitudes.

After all, the idea of multitude(s) means, among other things, a shift from hierarchical to more horizontal relations.³¹ Our assumption is that contributors can learn not only from one another but also from readers, just as readers can learn from contributors and from one another. Writing to and for the multitude means to make connections, provide support, and establish friendships for engagement, so we can re-imagine and transform religions and theologies towards both democracy and justice. Our work and writing must attend to emotional and aesthetic dimensions, which are crucial to good story-telling and the engagement of imagination. Theologies of the multitude for multitudes must involve not only re-imagining but also relations of equity and compassionate connections. As Helen Kim reminds us, Kwok’s scholarship and teaching are inseparable from her commitments to mentoring students, speaking to diverse populations, and building community.

It is precisely for the purpose of capacity building that we hope this Festschrift will serve as a potential resource for teaching and learning. For the same reason, we chose a publisher that is committed to making this Festschrift available online via open access.

This Festschrift is a sample of the impact that the work of Kwok Pui Lan has contributed to the study of religion in theology. It is missing essays in two subjects that are important to Kwok which we hope will be taken up in future discussions of her work: ecology and technology.

Ecology

Kwok herself started writing about ecological concerns in the 1990s, and these concerns have only become even more urgent today.³² In their alternative definitions of “religion,” Busto and

³¹ Hardt and Negri, *Multitude*, 56, 75, 84–85, 345, 402n, 110.

³² See, for example, Kwok Pui-lan, “Ecology and the Recycling of Christianity,”

Iwamura mention Ted Chiang's "shifting boundary between known and unknown." In that sense, the knowns and unknowns of the ecological challenge we face today is really a deeply religious and theological issue. Given the emphasis on building connections in many of the contributions, addressing ecological concerns also requires us to re-imagine and re-vivify our connections with the natural and the non-human animal world. This work is indispensable if we are to stop misunderstanding and misusing "freedom" as freedom to use nature without cost. As scholars of religion and theology who emphasize the implications of our own embodiment in terms of race and gender, we must not forget that our very embodied existence is dependent on the ecosystem of *this* Earth.

If ecology is arguably the most pressing issue confronting all of humankind at this point in history, humanity has also simultaneously witnessed our greatest and fastest technological advancements. Virtual worlds are now among many worlds that one may inhabit, which may have caused some to devalue the physical Earth on which we live. Again, technology is an issue that Kwok is interested and invested in, even if "digital imagination" is one that she is just starting to examine.³³

Technology

As Busto and Iwamura suggest in this Festschrift, technology can be used as an assimilationist shield to cover up racial and gender difference. Questions regarding technology may be particularly important for Asian American scholars in religion and theology in light of what scholars in the wider field of Asian American studies in recent years have called "techno-Orientalism," which refers to "the phenomenon of imagining Asia and Asians in hypo- or hypertechnological terms in cultural productions and political

The Ecumenical Review 44 (1992): 304–307; Kwok Pui-lan, "Ecology and Christology," *Feminist Theology* 5 (1997): 113–25; Kwok Pui-lan, *Christology for an Ecological Age* (New York: Continuum, 1999); Kwok Pui-lan, "What Has Love to Do with It? Planetarity, Feminism, and Theology," in *Planetary Loves: Spivak, Postcoloniality, and Theology*, eds. Stephen D. Moore and Mayra Rivera (New York: Fordham University Press, 2011), 31–45.

³³ Kwok Pui-lan, "Play with Ideas!" interview by Dr. Nancy Lynne Westfield, *The Wabash Center's Dialogue on Teaching*, episode 29, April 22, 2020, <https://dialogueonteaching.buzzsprout.com/829600/3462778-episode-29-play-with-ideas-kwok-pui-lan>.

discourse.”³⁴ We are talking about repeated portrayals, especially in science fiction and other kinds of speculative fiction, of a simultaneously tantalizing and threatening Asian futurity, with Asia and Asian bodies being associated with superior technologies as well as with an immense capacity to produce and consume commodities. This issue is latent in Busto and Iwamura’s essay, which mentions not only science fiction but also the first Japanese American astronaut in the 1980s, exactly when Japan became “the original techno-Orient . . . with the help of the cyberpunk movement.”³⁵ The same is true of Kao’s essay on surrogacy and *in vitro* fertilization. While there has been no lack of attempts to theologize technology, just as there have been theological works on ecology, we think that Asian American scholars of religion and theology have further contributions to make on both of these issues.

Conclusion

Inspired by what Hong calls Kwok’s “communally bound” and “accountable” scholarship, we as a scholarly network or multitude must keep moving and keep moving multitudes towards Re-imagining new Im-possibilities All-together, all the while examining, engaging, and expostulating the historical and structural constraints in which we find ourselves and which Kwok has dedicated her life to moving and to movements beyond them. The worlds we are moving toward or into may exist only in our re-imaginings, but moments of such re-imagination may move multitudes and turn into movements and movements of multitudes. As Kwok has shown us over and over again, learning is relational. As we learn from one another and together, we “must transgress constricted boundaries and negotiate new possibilities for daring to think and act differently.”³⁶

³⁴ David S. Roh, Betsy Huang, and Greta A Niu, “Technologizing Orientalism: An Introduction,” in *Techno-Orientalism: Imagining Asia in Speculative Fiction*, eds. David S. Roh, Betsy Huang, and Greta A Niu (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2015), 2.

³⁵ Roh, Huang, and Niu, “Technologizing Orientalism,” 3.

³⁶ Kwok, *Postcolonial Imagination and Feminist Theology*, 25.

The Souls of Yellow Folk:
*Moving from a Racially Segregated Nineteenth-Century
Train toward an Inclusive Twenty-First Century Asian
American Christian Witness*

William Yoo

Introduction

In 1896, the US Supreme Court affirmed the legality of racial segregation in the landmark case of *Plessy v. Ferguson*. In a seven-to-one decision, the court ruled against Homer Plessy, a multiracial person of French and Haitian descent arrested for sitting in a train car reserved for white passengers in Louisiana, and upheld segregated seating. In his dissent, Associate Justice John Marshall Harlan argued to strike laws treating African Americans as unequal to whites. But Harlan also found it absurd that Chinese Americans, who belonged to “a race so different from our own” and who contributed far less in civic virtue than African Americans, were permitted to sit with white passengers.¹

Thirty-one years later, the US Supreme Court in 1927 again ruled in favor of racial segregation. What was different in this case was the plaintiff was Jeu Gong Lum, the father of a native-born Chinese American girl, Martha Lum. Jeu Gong Lum and his spouse, Katherine, were both Chinese American immigrants and they sent their eight-year-old daughter Martha to the local public school for white students. After one year of learning at the school, the principal informed Martha that the school board had expelled her because she was not white and assigned her to the “colored school.” The Lum family appealed the decision and the case made its way to the highest judicatory body in the nation. The US Supreme Court acknowledged in *Gong Lum v. Rice* that Mississippi did not have a precise definition for the “colored race” but maintained the term was

¹ *U.S. Reports: Plessy v. Ferguson*, 163 U.S. 537 (1896), 561.

to be understood in its broadest sense, meaning the school board was right in sending Martha Lum to the “colored school” because she was a non-white student, as the law was constructed to serve “the broad dominant purpose of preserving the purity and integrity of the white race.”² Unlike *Plessy v. Ferguson*, there was no dissenting opinion as the court ruled unanimously against *Jeu Gong Lum*.

Both cases reveal how Asian Americans have existed in the interstices of an unjust society privileging white persons and discriminating against Black persons. My essay utilizes Kwok Pui-lan’s postcolonial prescriptions for a historical imagination and W. E. B. Du Bois’s theory of double-consciousness in *The Souls of Black Folk* to trace a racial history that interrogates Asian American interaction between white and Black cultures to uncover tensions and illumine possibilities for social justice. Just as Kwok resists binary constructs portraying Asian women as either “victims” or “heroines” and challenges romanticized notions of historical progress, I find the ambiguities and complexities of history warrant reexaminations of both the narrative of ascension from “yellow peril” to “model minority” and the notion of Asian Americans as quintessential kindred partners with African Americans in dismantling oppressive systems. I contend the diversity and fluidity of the Asian American experience—representing many diasporic cultures and entailing different and sometimes contradictory encounters with white communities and other communities of color—constitute critical components in our ongoing theological enterprise to express and enact a more honest and inclusive Asian American Christian witness today.

The Cracks and Fissures on a Racially Segregated Nineteenth-Century Train

In *Postcolonial Imagination and Feminist Theology*, Kwok identifies the “struggle to know” as a crucial component in one’s long intellectual journey. Kwok explains it is a struggle for two reasons. The first is because the process demands that one devote years learning what others deem “important to know” in order to earn the credentials to share what one believes is important. The

² Louis Menand, “The Supreme Court Case that Enshrined White Supremacy in Law: How *Plessy v. Ferguson* Shaped the History of Racial Discrimination in America,” *New Yorker*, February 4, 2019, <https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2019/02/04>. See also *U.S. Reports: Gong Lum v. Rice*, 275 U.S. 78 (1927), 78–87.

second is because one must affirm for oneself “that you have something important to say and that your experience counts.” As an Asian feminist postcolonial theologian, Kwok finds imagination as a key step in the process of decolonization because “to imagine means to discern something that is not fitting, to search for new images, and to arrive at new patterns of meaning and interpretation.” Kwok also argues this process must empathize with (rather than simply include) “the cracks, the fissures, and the openings, which refuse to be shaped into any framework, and which are often consigned to the periphery.”³

The cases of *Plessy v. Ferguson* and *Gong Lum v. Rice* illustrate the ways in which Asian Americans were in the cracks and fissures of unjust yet lawful policies of racial segregation. In 1892, Plessy agreed to be arrested on the East Louisiana Railroad’s train for his act of civil disobedience. As with other pivotal moments from Black organizers in the pursuit of civil rights, such as Rosa Parks’s refusal in 1955 to give up her seat to a white man on a bus in Montgomery, Alabama, Plessy’s solitary action was a part of a larger campaign orchestrated after months of meticulous and shrewd planning, with the precise intent of criminal arrest and judicial appeal. Plessy was a light-skinned man belonging to the French-speaking Creole community in New Orleans, with a racially diverse family tree counting grandparents and parents of French and Haitian descent. His interest in local politics led him to join the *Comité des Citoyens* (Citizens’ Committee) alongside other leaders in the Creole community and volunteer to be arrested for sitting in the whites-only train car. In addition to his respectable position as a married, 30-year-old shoemaker, Plessy’s racial identity proved strategic to the committee. Plessy’s petition identified him as a person of “mixed descent, in the proportion of seven eighths Caucasian and one eighth African blood.” As part of Plessy’s defense, his attorney highlighted that Louisiana lacked precise definitions for race and asked whether the court would allow “a single drop of African blood . . . to color a whole ocean of Caucasian whiteness.”⁴

³ Kwok Pui-lan, *Postcolonial Imagination and Feminist Theology* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2005), 29–30.

⁴ *U.S. Reports: Plessy v. Ferguson*, 163 U.S. 537 (1896), 538 and Steve Luxenberg, *Separate: The Story of Plessy v. Ferguson, and America’s Journey from Slavery to Segregation* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2019), 482.

The Supreme Court's majority opinion denied Plessy's claim because the train in question provided separate but equal accommodations for white and colored passengers. The ruling did not dwell on Plessy's claims as a multiracial person and avoided placing him in the category of colored. Rather, the ruling focused on whether racial segregation was a "reasonable regulation" and concluded it was "in reference to the established usages, customs and traditions of the people, and with a view to the promotion of their comfort, and the preservation of the public peace and good order." In the minds of the seven justices in the majority, they imagined Plessy was asking the court to change the hearts and minds of white Americans through legislative means. White Americans believed in the superiority of the white race and wanted segregationist laws to avoid social contact with Black Americans. The justices delineated two different notions of equality, legal and social, and found the provision of separate but equal accommodations preserved legal equality and summarily rejected the proposition that they were empowered to enforce social equality. "If the two races are to meet upon terms of social equality," the ruling stated, "It must be the result of natural affinities, a mutual appreciation of each other's merits and a voluntary consent of individuals."⁵

In 1896, it was unclear how Asian Americans fit within legal and social understandings of equality designed for just two races, white and Black. In Erika Lee's history of Asian Americans, Lee traces one of the earliest documented settlements of Asian Americans in the southern US to Louisiana, the state where Plessy sought to overturn racial segregation. In the 1840s, Filipinos established the fishing village of St. Malo, near Lake Borgne, and sent fish and shrimp to New Orleans for export. A larger Filipino community made roots in New Orleans between 1850 and 1870.⁶ Chinese immigrants also came to southern states like Louisiana and Mississippi in the latter half of the nineteenth century. The editor of the *Vicksburg Times*, a local newspaper in Mississippi, observed some postbellum white planters welcomed Chinese Americans as better laborers than African Americans on their fields precisely because they were in the cracks and fissures of a *Weltanschauung* defined and

⁵ U.S. Reports: Plessy v. Ferguson, 163 U.S. 537 (1896), 550-551.

⁶ Erika Lee, *The Making of Asian America: A History* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2015), 33.

divided by the two (white and Black) races. Chinese Americans lacked voting rights and were not, in the minds of white planters, like Plessy and other Black Americans who were seeking all the rights and promises of emancipation. The *Vicksburg Times* thus favored the introduction of Asian Americans as a third race to maintain an economic, political, and social order upholding white supremacy: “Our prosperity depends entirely upon the recovery of lost ground, and we therefore say let the Coolies come, and we will take the chance of Christianizing them.”⁷ “Coolies” was a racially derogatory term for Chinese Americans and despite the religious claims of evangelization, it was clear Asian Americans in the southern states were consigned to the periphery as economic competition to the Black and white working classes.

Where then did Asian Americans sit on trains in Louisiana designed for two races, white and Black? Unlike Plessy, whose identity was both white and Black, Asian Americans were neither and did not fit the regnant framework. In his memoir from 1914, Wu Tingfang, a Chinese diplomat who visited the US on several occasions, divulged his discomfort when riding on trains through the southern states. Wu recounted an indelible moment at a railroad station when he encountered two waiting rooms, one for white persons and one for colored persons: “The railway porter took my portmanteau to the room for the white, but my conscience soon whispered I had come to the wrong place, as neither of the two rooms was intended for people of my complexion.”⁸ The yellow race was not the same as the white race, but it appears at least some Asian Americans, perhaps based on class or professional status, sat with white passengers.

The lone dissenter in *Plessy v. Ferguson*, John Marshall Harlan, noted the presence of Asian Americans in the whites-only train cars. The most cited sections of Harlan’s famous dissent—which is remembered as the “Great Dissent” for establishing legal precedent for future civil rights cases, including the landmark decision in 1954 desegregating public schools, *Brown v. Board of Education*—revolve around his legal argument of the US Constitution as “color-blind,” guaranteeing “all citizens are equal before the law,” and his racial

⁷ James W. Loewen, *The Mississippi Chinese: Between Black and White, Second Edition* (Long Grove, IL: Waveland Press, 1988), 22.

⁸ Wu Tingfang, *America through the Spectacles of an Oriental Diplomat* (New York: Frederick A. Stokes Company, 1914), 85.

argument connecting Black and white Americans as “indissolubly linked together” with a shared destiny requiring the eradication of segregation for both races to flourish in peace and prosperity.⁹ A lesser-known passage from Harlan’s “Great Dissent” addresses Asian Americans. The associate justice devoted one paragraph to criticizing how Chinese Americans, under Harlan’s reading of the law, could “ride in the same passenger coach with white citizens of the United States,” whereas “citizens of the black race in Louisiana, many of whom perhaps risked their lives for the preservation of the Union,” were relegated to seats for colored persons.¹⁰ Asian Americans remained in the cracks and fissures of Harlan’s imagination. Harlan thought it was absurd and unjust for Asian Americans to receive rights and privileges denied to African Americans. There was no place for Asian Americans in Harlan’s vision of a nation purified in the war for Black emancipation, with its painful memory of sacrifice and bloodshed from both white and Black Americans.

Two years later, Harlan would again insist Chinese Americans remain in the cracks and fissures rather than the mainstreams of life in the US. In *United States v. Wong Kim Ark*, the Supreme Court ruled on the issue of birthright citizenship through the specific case of Wong Kim Ark, a man born in San Francisco in 1873 to Chinese immigrants who themselves were ineligible to become US citizens. In 1895, Wong Kim Ark was denied re-entry into the US after a visit to China because his rightful claim as a US citizen was rejected. Before reaching the Supreme Court, lower courts ruled in favor of Wong Kim Ark, affirming both his citizenship status and the broader principle of birthright citizenship. The highest court in the land agreed in a six to two decision. The majority opinion explained that the case boiled down to the straightforward question of “whether a child born in the United States, of parents of Chinese descent, who, at the time of his birth, are subjects of the Emperor of China, but have a permanent domicil and residence in the United States” is at the time of birth a citizen.¹¹ But Harlan, along with the Chief Justice Melville Weston Fuller, disagreed in a dissenting opinion that Fuller authored and Harlan joined. In their view, the US Constitution, which Harlan had argued was “color-blind” in ruling for Plessy,

⁹ *U.S. Reports: Plessy v. Ferguson*, 163 U.S. 537 (1896), 559–60.

¹⁰ *U.S. Reports: Plessy v. Ferguson*, 163 U.S. 537 (1896), 561.

¹¹ *U.S. Reports: United States v. Wong Kim Ark*, 169 U.S. 649 (1898), 705.

“was not designed to accord citizenship” to persons of Chinese descent because of their irreconcilably foreign identities, which were illustrated in their seemingly ineradicable fidelities to the “ancient [Chinese] Empire” and inability to assimilate, remaining “pilgrims and sojourners as their fathers” in the US.¹²

In a lecture to law students two months before the case involving Wong Kim Ark, Harlan explained his interpretation of the Fourteenth Amendment, which guaranteed in the Constitution citizenship to all persons born and naturalized in the US. Harlan expanded on his vision of white and Black Americans linked together in seeking a rebirth of a nation torn asunder in a vicious war resulting in the victory of Black emancipation. Harlan believed protecting citizenship and civil rights for Black Americans was central to the nation’s destiny at the dawn of the twentieth century. A student asked, “Would a Chinaman born in this country be a citizen?” Harlan demurred from answering, divulging he could not because of an impending case, but the associate justice expressed his viewpoint agreeing with legislation that excluded the Chinese “upon the idea that this is a race utterly foreign to us and never will assimilate with us.” Harlan criticized the religious beliefs and practices of Chinese Americans as pagan and observed that “no matter how long they have been here,” they were buried in China after death.¹³ One biographer of Harlan connects Harlan’s opinions in the two cases involving Homer Plessy and Wong Kim Ark as illustrative of his racial vision for the US: “Black Louisianans perhaps had risked their lives to preserve the Union, whereas Chinese Americans had no role in his version of the country’s history.”¹⁴ Without questioning the role of white Americans in an oppressive, colonial, and racist history, Harlan compared Chinese Americans unfavorably with Black Americans and sought to consign Chinese Americans to the peripheries of the nation’s future.

Harlan was neither the first nor the last white American in the halls of governmental power to juxtapose African Americans and Asian Americans. In 1882, the US Congress passed a bill to exclude Chinese immigrants from the country. John Franklin Miller, a senator from California, introduced the bill in a two-hour

¹² *U.S. Reports*: United States v. Wong Kim Ark, 169 U.S. 649 (1898), 725–26.

¹³ Linda Przybyszewski, *The Republic according to John Marshall Harlan* (Chapel Hill and London: University of North Carolina Press, 1999), 120.

¹⁴ Przybyszewski, *The Republic according to John Marshall Harlan*, 121.

presentation before his senate colleagues, laying out the cultural and economic dangers of “yellow peril” if Chinese immigration were to continue. Miller declared Chinese immigrants came from a “degraded and inferior race.” His colleagues did not hesitate to confirm Miller’s assessment with their own views comparing the Chinese to “rats,” “beasts,” and “swine.”¹⁵ One senator from Massachusetts, George Frisbie Hoar, decried the bill as a new manifestation of “the old race prejudice” and compared anti-Chinese legislation to anti-Black racism. Hoar evoked the enslavement of millions of African Americans in stating “our own Republic and our own generation have yielded to this delusion and have paid the terrible penalty.” He also asked, “What argument can be urged against the Chinese which was not heard against the negro within living memory?”¹⁶ White Americans had once defended Black enslavement with racist ideologies that derided African Americans as “savages,” “heathens,” and “wild beasts” unfit for emancipation and were now repeating the same mistake with Chinese Americans. Despite Hoar’s appeals to the “immortal truths” of the US Declaration of Independence, which the senator found “came from the same source with the Golden Rule and the Sermon on the Mount” in the New Testament, the Chinese Exclusion Act, the first law to restrict immigration based on race, passed with little opposition.¹⁷

A Triply Inscribed Process in a Twentieth-Century School District Constructed for Two Races

After the passage of the Chinese Exclusion Act, immigration from China to the US was severely constrained but not entirely eradicated. Jeu Gong Lum was one of approximately 17,000 Chinese immigrants who entered the US by crossing Canadian and Mexican borders between 1882 and 1920. Lum made his way from Canada to Mississippi, married a Chinese American woman, Katherine Wong, and together they opened a family grocery store serving a mostly Black clientele.¹⁸ When the time came for their daughter, Martha, to

¹⁵ Lee, *The Making of Asian America*, 89.

¹⁶ George Frisbie Hoar, *Chinese Immigration Speech of Hon. Geo. F. Hoar of Massachusetts: Delivered in the Senate of the United States, Wednesday, March 1, 1882* (Washington, D.C.: Government Publishing Office, 1882), 14.

¹⁷ Hoar, *Chinese Immigration Speech*, 14 and 28.

¹⁸ Adrienne Berard, *Water Tossing Boulders: How a Family of Chinese Immigrants Led*

attend public school, they had two choices: the school for white students and the school for colored students. In *Plessy v. Ferguson*, the majority opinion upholding racial segregation gave the example of “separate schools for white and colored children” as the most ubiquitous demonstration of the effectiveness of existing laws providing separate but equal accommodations.¹⁹ Yet in Mississippi, the Lum family did not fit in a racial binary that defined “colored” as Black. They understood, like nearly all Black and white Mississippians, the legal principle of “separate but equal” was a lie and in practice, every accommodation designated to white persons, including schools, was vastly superior to provisions for Black persons. The Lum family enrolled their daughter in the school for white students.

In James W. Loewen’s history of Chinese Americans in Mississippi, Loewen traces the unjust economic and racial structures that the Lum family experienced. White Mississippians initially recruited Chinese immigrants during Reconstruction (1865–1876) as laborers to compete with and replace Black Mississippians on white-owned plantations. After federal officials departed the southern states in 1877, effectively ending Reconstruction, the same white Mississippians once again preferred Black laborers because steps to racial equality had been halted with the restoration of white supremacy. Black persons were easier to exploit in unfair sharecropping arrangements. Chinese immigrants in Mississippi did not have many resources, but some came with enough to open a small grocery instead of sharecropping. Others worked in these groceries until they accrued the necessary capital to open their own store.²⁰ Neither Chinese nor Black Mississippians had access to loans from white-owned banks, but Chinese immigrants utilized an informal network of transnational relationships to start and sustain small businesses.

How were Chinese Americans able to succeed in an economy controlled and dominated by white persons and institutions? Their hard-earned capital surely paled in comparison to white entrepreneurs, especially when considering the access and advantages the latter group held across real estate and banking

the First Fight to Desegregate Schools in the Jim Crow South (Boston: Beacon Press, 2016), 14.

¹⁹ *U.S. Reports: Plessy v. Ferguson*, 163 U.S. 537 (1896), 544.

²⁰ Loewen, *The Mississippi Chinese*, 26–31.

resources. Loewen explains Chinese Mississippians found cracks and fissures within a social system “reinforced by caste patterns between white and black” and established groceries where white entrepreneurs would not, in Black neighborhoods.²¹ White entrepreneurs did not want to interact with Black customers and the few who did found their status in their white communities imperiled. Loewen imagines what it looked like inside a Chinese-owned grocery store in Mississippi at the turn of the twentieth century:

The clientele consisted almost entirely of poor Negroes who worked on the nearby plantations or at menial jobs in town. The situation was in some ways incredible: Delta Negroes, many of whom had never been farther from home than the nearest town, encountering a visitor of strange appearance and customs, from across the globe, speaking no English. In some stores a pointer stick was positioned at the counter, and the customer could point to the items he wanted, the grocer’s English being limited to the price. When the wholesaler came around at month’s end, he found that the merchant had without fail saved the last package of each item he sold, so that he could present it to demonstrate to the salesman what he wanted to reorder.²²

Kwok defines “postcolonial imagination” as “a desire, a determination, and a process of disengagement from the whole colonial syndrome, which takes many forms and guises,” and engages Stuart Hall’s observation that delineates the colonial process as “doubly inscribed, affecting both the metropolis and the colonies.”²³ For the Lum family and other Chinese Mississippians, the racial syndrome and racist processes were triply inscribed, affecting white, Black, and Chinese Americans. And the attempt to enroll Martha Lum in the whites-only school first challenged and then reinforced racist systems, pitting the two colored races against one another.

As Lum’s case made its way up the judicial courts, from county to state to federal levels, Lum’s lawyers argued that Lum’s dismissal from the whites-only school was unjust discrimination. As the law-making race, white Americans construed and enforced segregation

²¹ Loewen, *The Mississippi Chinese*, 49.

²² Loewen, *The Mississippi Chinese*, 33.

²³ Kwok, *Postcolonial Imagination and Feminist Theology*, 2-3.

to maintain the purity of each of the two races, white and Black, and to prevent “the mingling of the children in the school room,” which would result in “social intercourse and social equality.” As “a child of Chinese blood, born in, and a citizen of the United States,” Lum’s rights included the commensurate protection from Black children: “The white race may not legally expose the yellow race to a danger that the dominant race recognizes and, by the same laws, guards itself against.”²⁴ Lum’s lawyers did not claim Lum was white, but they insisted colored was a category applicable to only one race, Black.

Lum’s initial victory in the local court was overturned by the state’s Supreme Court in 1925 and then upheld in the US Supreme Court two years later. Chief Justice William Howard Taft penned the unanimous decision in 1927. Taft recognized Jeu Gong Lum as a taxpaying resident of Mississippi and Martha Lum as a legal US citizen, but denied Martha Lum’s enrollment in the whites-only school because of the existence of a colored school. Segregated schools “furnished facilities for education equal to that offered to all, whether white, brown, yellow or black.” Taft conceded most of the judicial precedents, including *Plessy v. Ferguson*, were doubly inscribed, affecting Black and white citizens, but the chief justice did not view this case regarding “pupils of the yellow races” as requiring any deviation from existing state laws and affirmed the rights of school districts in Mississippi to classify Chinese Americans as colored.²⁵

One historian’s account of the Lum family’s struggle notes the complexity of their legacy in fighting racial segregation. Adrienne Berard argues that the Lum family should be remembered as pioneers as one of the first families of color who dared to challenge racist educational policies. But Berard also observes that the Lum family was not engaged in an inclusive and fully righteous struggle for all races. Berard assesses Jeu Gong and Katherine Lum as making a “decision for their children” that was also a “racist decision”: “Whether it’s part of what was considered normal at the time or not, I don’t think you can let them off the hook for that very obvious fact that they did not want their daughters going to school with black children.”²⁶ At one level, the story of the Lums entails the journey of

²⁴ *U.S. Reports: Gong Lum v. Rice*, 275 U.S. 78 (1927), 78–79.

²⁵ *U.S. Reports: Gong Lum v. Rice*, 275 U.S. 78 (1927), 79–87.

²⁶ Sarah Begley, “How a Chinese Family’s 1927 Lawsuit Set a Precedent for School

how their specific family unit navigated racist systems in their racially segregated town of white students and Black customers. At another level, the Lum family's complicated journey in Mississippi represents the multifarious ambiguities and challenges of being "yellow" in a sinful world of anti-Black prejudice and white supremacy.

Double-Consciousness or Triple-Consciousness?

In 1903, W. E. B. Du Bois began *The Souls of Black Folk* with the thesis observing "the problem of the Twentieth Century is the problem of the color-line." With penetrating interrogation of anti-Black prejudice and white supremacy, Du Bois recast the history of the US with Black Americans both at the center alongside white Americans and as a people of uniquely important insight, "gifted with second-sight in this American world" borne of their hard and righteous struggle for equality. He traced how African American folk and gospel songs, which were "the rhythmic cry of the slave," served as foundational components for many popular musical compositions from Black and white artists, and argued these songs emerging from the soul of the Black experience comprised "the most beautiful expression of human experience." Du Bois noted Black Americans fought in battles and shared in sorrows, and therefore he urged white Americans to more fully enact the principles of justice and truth enshrined in the Bible and US Constitution: "Our song, our toil, our cheer, and warning have been given to this nation in blood-brotherhood. Are not these gifts worth the giving? Is not this work and striving? Would America have been America without her Negro people?"²⁷

Du Bois also developed the notion of double-consciousness to explain the Black American experience. Black Americans occupied two identities, Black and American. In their Blackness, they found their beauty and dignity as well as abundant resources to strengthen their resolve. Yet, their travails as Black persons in a white-dominated nation created a "double-consciousness" in which Black persons saw themselves "through the revelation of the other world," which Du Bois vividly described as a "peculiar sensation" and "this

Segregation," *TIME*, October 18, 2016, https://time.com/45334_76/lum-v-rice-water-tossing-boulders/.

²⁷ W. E. B. Du Bois, *The Souls of Black Folk: Essays and Sketches* (Chicago: McClurg & Co., 1903), vii, 3, and 251-263.

sense of always looking at one's self through the eyes of others, of measuring one's soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity."²⁸ Though the challenge of carrying two selves was arduous and painful, Du Bois acknowledged these racialized struggles were real and prescribed the only way forward was to directly confront, rather than ignore, the problem of the color line.

Kwok's scholarship on imagination informs the need for Asian American Christians to similarly confront at least three pervasive realities: anti-Asian racism, anti-Black racism, and white supremacy. In *Discovering the Bible in the Non-Biblical World*, Kwok draws parallels between Katie Geneva Cannon's incisive analysis of white Christian complicity in the sins of Black enslavement and the "burning questions" Chinese students raised in the early twentieth century challenging white Christian involvement in Western imperialism. Kwok subsequently argues that biblical interpretation in Asia requires "a powerful act of imagination" entailing processes of "a consciousness of conflict (something not fitting), a pause, the finding of a new image, the repatterning of reality, and interpretation."²⁹ Just as Kwok criticizes Christian approaches to the Bible in Asia that mimic evangelical teachings from the West and therefore do not resonate with Asian contexts and realities, Asian American Christians must also fully engage history with theological approaches that affirm their dignity, assert that the Black and white racial binary insufficiently captures what it means to be an American, and acknowledge the strivings of Black Americans in their righteous struggle for racial justice.

The cases of *Plessy v. Ferguson* and *Gong Lum v. Rice* simultaneously illustrate the insufficiency and power of the Black and white racial binary. The increasing presence of Asian Americans riding segregated trains and attending segregated schools designed for two races disrupted the social order and forced a rethinking of unjust laws that ultimately maintained white supremacy by expanding the lesser category of colored to include Asian Americans alongside Black, Indigenous, and other persons of color. Asian Americans like the Lum family did not construct this racial and racist binary, but they traversed the binary. Any approach to finding new theological images that hastily moves past the binary skips over

²⁸ Du Bois, *The Souls of Black Folk*, 3.

²⁹ Kwok Pui-lan, *Discovering the Bible in the Non-Biblical World* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1995), 12-13.

the necessary process of confronting a consciousness of conflict. Asian Americans like Grace Lee Boggs, in her activism alongside Black Americans in Detroit's Black Power movement in the 1950s, and Syngman Rhee, in his joining Martin Luther King, Jr. and other Black leaders for civil rights as a campus minister at the University of Louisville in the 1960s, connected the yearnings for justice in their Asian American souls with the Black folk and gospel songs that conveyed sorrow, breathed hope, and inspired faith. Yet, other Asian Americans thought their yellow skin was a lighter shade closer to white than black. In an absurd but very real world where white-skinned people were treated better than black-skinned people, even a multiracial person with "a single drop of African blood" like Homer Plessy, some Asian Americans endeavored to be identified as close as possible to the white race.

Does Du Bois's notion of double-consciousness also help to explain the Asian American experience? Asian American theologians and biblical interpreters have observed the phenomenon of constantly shifting identities between "Asian" and "American." Peter C. Phan observes Asian Americans are received neither as fully American in the US because of their Asian appearance nor authentically Asian in the nations where they trace their family origins because of their American residence. Like Du Bois, Phan acknowledges both the deleterious aspects of these racialized realities and the creative possibilities of being between two worlds. Phan posits Asian Americans embrace opportunities to combine this duality and cultivate resources from both worlds to "fashion a new, different world, so that persons at the margins stand not only between these two worlds and cultures but also beyond them."³⁰ But the Lum family's journey in Mississippi illustrates how many Asian Americans found themselves in the cracks and fissures of at least three worlds: the world of Asian America, the world of Black America, and the world of white America.

Therefore, it may be more accurate to frame the Asian American experience as one of triple-consciousness with three different lenses illumining different and sometimes contradictory revelations. The history of the US contains many more racial and

³⁰ Peter C. Phan, "Betxiwt and Between: Doing Theology with Memory and Imagination," in *Journeys at the Margin: Toward an Autobiographical Theology in American-Asian Perspective*, eds. Peter C. Phan and Jung Young Lee (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1999), 113.

ethnic perspectives beyond Asian, Black, and white, such as Indigenous, Hispanic, and Latina/o, but I focus on the enduring Black and white racial binary because of its pervasive ubiquity and unjust authority in this nation's civic life. Frank H. Wu, the first Asian American to teach as a law professor at Howard University, a historically Black institution in Washington, DC, finds Du Bois's *The Souls of Black Folk* a worthy guide for Asian American interpretation. Wu calls upon Asian Americans to be "conscious of black and white" and "acquire such a consciousness" that seeks to supplement other perspectives rather than replace them.³¹

Du Bois's explication of double-consciousness balances a clear-eyed presentation of the deadly ramifications of white supremacy on the everyday lives of Black Americans with a steadfast refusal to allow these racist perspectives to define what it meant to be Black. Du Bois criticized attempts to "bleach his Negro soul in a flood of white Americanism" because Black Americans had a unique and distinctive message to share with the world.³² Applying a triple-consciousness deepens Asian American approaches to theology because it simultaneously confronts the complexities of encountering the Black and white racial binary and constructs new interpretations expressing the beauty, dignity, and creative wisdom of being Asian American.

Toward an Inclusive Twenty-First Century Asian American Christian Witness

Two historians of Asian America point to what possibilities lie when engaging triple-consciousness. In *Asian Americans: An Interpretive History*, Sucheng Chan delineates four analytical perspectives in studies of Asian Americans and other minoritized groups in the US: (1) An assimilationist approach that "implies members of minority groups are deviant or deficient" and must therefore adopt and integrate white and Western cultural norms to flourish; (2) A celebratory approach emphasizing the accomplishments of racially minoritized individuals without examining racist systems; (3) A systemic approach focusing primarily on the collective behavior of minoritized groups and the discriminatory obstacles they face in society; and (4) An inclusive

³¹ Frank H. Wu, *Yellow: Race in America Beyond Black and White* (New York: Basic Books, 2002), 27.

³² Du Bois, *The Souls of Black Folk*, 4.

approach that “sees members of minority groups as agents of history – men and women who make choices that shape their lives, even when these may be severely limited by conditions beyond their control.”³³ Chan utilizes the fourth approach to recount a history of Asian Americans as both immigrants and people of color. As immigrants, Chan argues that Asian Americans encountered some of the same barriers as European immigrants, but as people of color, they were treated and mistreated as “perpetual foreigners,” denied access to the rights European immigrants possessed.

Chan delineates the “acculturation process” of Asian Americans as multivalent. Many early Asian American immigrants were poor and came from the middling classes. Thus, they were familiar with class distinctions and economic discriminations. But with some exceptions, such as the Hakka among Chinese immigrants, they had not experienced systemic prejudice on account of their race.³⁴ In the US, Asian Americans learned how to survive in a brutal maze of anti-Black racism and white supremacy. Harlan’s ranking of Chinese Americans in *Plessy v. Ferguson* as a foreign race undeserving of the rights and privileges Black Americans had earned, from centuries of toil in agricultural fields as enslaved laborers and on bloody battlefields as combatants in the Civil War, demonstrates one interpretation of this nation’s racial hierarchy. Insistence from the Lum family’s attorneys that Martha Lum belonged in the school for white students rather than the school for Black students on grounds the colored race only referred to African Americans illustrates an attempt to reposition Asian Americans as above African Americans.

In *The Making of Asian America: A History*, Erika Lee presents a rich and complex narrative in which Lee wrestles with whether a solitary notion of “Asian America” and one “Asian American history” are even possible when accounting for a “staggering diversity of people that represent twenty-four distinct groups” from different national origins and differences in immigrant and generational status. Lee holds in productive tension the presence of both many individual stories and the collective threads connecting these manifold experiences when contending that “Asian Americans occupy unique and constantly shifting positions between black and

³³ Sucheng Chan, *Asian Americans: An Interpretive History* (New York: Twayne, 1991), xii.

³⁴ Chan, *Asian Americans*, 187.

white, foreign and American, privilege and poverty.”³⁵ Anti-Asian racism manifested such that Asian Americans were regarded as yellow savages, perpetual foreigners, and probationary citizens. Exclusionary immigration laws and the forced incarceration of Japanese Americans during the Second World War are but two episodes of a long, racist, and oppressive history. Yet, Lee finds any serious analysis of race across Asian American history must delve into the ways Asian Americans navigated the enduring Black and white racial binary.

Approaches to Asian American theology must also grapple with a diversity of experiences traversing the Black and white racial binary. In doing so, there likely exists a temptation to apply binary interpretations with overly simplistic analysis that flattens rather than deepens. One unhelpful example is a dissection between “good immigrants” who worked hard, devoted their energies and finances to establish new congregations, and partnered with other persons of color for racial justice, and “bad immigrants” who economically exploited Black communities, participated in unhealthy congregations with generational tensions, and copied the theologies of a white evangelicalism that touted commercialism, individualism, and other Western cultural priorities.

Kwok’s theology simultaneously prevents such binary thinking and presents a generative way forward. In Kwok’s assessment of Asian feminist theology, Kwok warns against impulses that oversimplify the diverse experiences, multiple interests, and varied social locations of Asian women. Kwok resists approaches employing the binary constructs of “victim” and “heroine” to depict Asian women as either victims of oppression or as heroines fighting for freedom. Instead, Kwok argues for culturally and historically specific analysis that treats the experiences of Korean women who lived through Japanese colonialism and militarized division differently from the experiences of Indian women negotiating caste, dowry, and Hindu nationalism.³⁶

An examination of another interpreter of Asian America illumines creative possibilities and ambiguous complexities for more culturally and historically specific approaches to Asian American theology. In *Margins and Mainstreams: Asians in American*

³⁵ Lee, *The Making of Asian America*, 3–8.

³⁶ Kwok, *Postcolonial Imagination and Feminist Theology*, 35.

History and Culture, Gary Y. Okihiro advances the thesis that Asian Americans and African Americans are a “kindred people” who share a history of colonization, migration, oppression, and resistance “forged in the fire of white supremacy and struggle.”³⁷ In answering the ever-present question of whether yellow is black or white, Okihiro argues the query is both a false dichotomy, since the US is a nation of many (not two) colors, and a necessary reality, because “America’s two-tiered racial order forces Asians and all people of color, including those who are bi-racial, to choose between black and white.”³⁸ Therefore, Okihiro posits yellow is neither black nor white but a shade of black because Asian Americans have closer affinities and common experiences with African Americans. Okihiro identifies African American support for Chinese American immigration in the late nineteenth century, such as Frederick Douglass’s criticism of white southern planters seeking to exploit Asian American laborers with the same unjust economic and racist policies at the foundations of Black enslavement, and the vote of Blanche K. Bruce, the lone Black senator in the US, that was against the Chinese Exclusion Act, to demonstrate “the extent and degree of solidarity felt by African Americans toward Asian Americans.”³⁹ Okihiro connects the verbal and written protests from African American political leaders who opposed anti-Asian racism with the actions of Asian American small business owners who defied segregationist laws and violent white mobs to hire Black employees, offer lodging to Black travelers, and welcome Black diners. African Americans and Asian Americans utilized different tools to fight a common foe in white supremacy.

There is much in Okihiro’s vision of African Americans and Asian Americans as a kindred people for theological approaches engaging the three worlds of Asian America, Black America, and white America. Rather than a generic call to Christian discipleship and unity absent any cultural or historical context, the notion of kinship between African Americans and Asian Americans is grounded in a specific history of struggle and resistance. Okihiro acknowledges some Asian Americans disagree with him. In his

³⁷ Gary Y. Okihiro, *Margins and Mainstreams: Asians in American History and Culture* (Seattle and London: University of Washington Press, 1994), 34.

³⁸ Okihiro, *Margins and Mainstreams*, xi-xii.

³⁹ Okihiro, *Margins and Mainstreams*, 49-55. Bruce opposed the Chinese Exclusion Act during his term as a senator from 1875 to 1881.

college classrooms from the early 1990s, Okihiro asked his Asian American students whether they felt a closer kinship to Black or white Americans and found there was no discernable pattern. In one class, nearly all claimed affinity with white persons. In another class, nearly all expressed solidarity with Black persons.⁴⁰ In Asian American congregations today, the answers will likewise vary. But we must press forward and demand a specific answer. One instinct will be to respond with a deflection stating a color-blindness based on scriptural principles. Though answers appealing to God's universal love are not necessarily untrue, Asian American Christians are better served with theologies confronting, rather than avoiding, the Black and white racial binary. Just as Okihiro detects and names the economic forces obscuring the kinship ties between African Americans and Asian Americans, Asian American Christians must identify and deconstruct spiritual teachings that fail to substantively address the multiple layers of racism in this nation's past, present, and future.

Here, too, the wisdom of Kwok's Asian, feminist, and postcolonial theology offers depth and nuance to Okihiro's vision of kinship between African Americans and Asian Americans. Kwok insists on studying Asian women as agents of history rather than solely as objects of multiple oppressions. Just as Kwok cautions against approaches that define and delimit Asian women to the colonial structures and discriminatory forces in their lives, Asian Americans must be interpreted as actors, with historical agency, who made their own difficult choices in a nation in which those in power, all the way up to the highest levels of judicial authority, endeavored to sustain white supremacy.

Developments of kinship theologies must therefore recognize African Americans and Asian Americans as different peoples with different histories. The forced trans-Atlantic migration of enslaved Africans is distinct from the trans-Pacific migration of impoverished Asians. Another historian of Asian America, Ellen D. Wu, rightly observes that Asian Americans were "profoundly shaped by understandings of blackness and whiteness" but not as "silent and aloof" bystanders.⁴¹ Asian Americans actively participated in and shaped the racial discourse of the US. Some made courageous

⁴⁰ Okihiro, *Margins and Mainstreams*, 60.

⁴¹ Ellen D. Wu, *The Color of Success: Asian Americans and the Origins of the Model Minority* (Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2014), 7.

decisions and walked alongside African Americans in liberation movements for equal rights. Others resisted the ways white Americans sought to weaponize the notion of Asian Americans as a “model minority” to impugn Black Americans for their comparative lack of economic wealth and question the veracity of institutional racism. Yet, some made choices that reinforced the enduring injustices of white supremacy and anti-Black prejudice. And others practiced narrow and myopic interpretations of Christianity that emphasized congregational piety at the expense of civic participation.

Conclusion

In 1998, US President Bill Clinton awarded the Presidential Medal of Freedom to Fred Korematsu. Korematsu, along with other Japanese Americans, resisted the US government’s forced imprisonment and relocation during the Second World War and challenged the constitutionality of Executive Order 9066 in the courts. Approximately 40 years after his conviction, Korematsu reopened the case after previously hidden documents revealed a suppression of evidence proving the military’s claims of Japanese American espionage were false. Korematsu argued his appeal was important because it would entail more than a personal victory, but also stand as a resounding message to ensure all Americans be treated justly and equally. “As long as my record stands in federal court,” Korematsu explained, “any American citizen can be held in prison or concentration camps without a trial or a hearing.”⁴² Clinton presented Korematsu with the highest civilian honor and recognized him along with other “ordinary citizens,” including Homer Plessy and Rosa Parks, who each stood for “millions of souls” in the “long history of our country’s constant search for justice.”⁴³

In 2001, another Asian American, Syngman Rhee, recalled his years serving as a campus minister at the University of Louisville in the 1960s. Rhee joined Black students from the university and other Black activists in the city in their movement for equal access to public facilities. When a group of African American university students decided to form a Black Student Union, they approached Rhee in

⁴² Lee, *The Making of Asian America*, 395.

⁴³ Akil Vohra, “Honoring Fred Korematsu,” *The United States White House*, February 1, 2011, <https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/blog/2011/02/01/honoring-fred-korematsu>.

their search for a faculty advisor. Rhee initially responded, "Why are you asking me to be your faculty advisor? You know I am not black." The students said, "Yes, we know you are not black, but we saw you out on the street demonstrating together with us for our civil rights."⁴⁴ Rhee then agreed to be the first faculty advisor for the Black Student Union at the University of Louisville. The fires of white supremacy, anti-Asian racism, anti-Black racism, and other discriminatory evils continue to rage. Where will we find the souls of yellow folk? If we yearn for Asian American Christians to be on the streets actively participating in Black Lives Matter and other movements for police reform, voting rights, and racial equality alongside African Americans, approaches to Asian American theology that are grounded in historical context and inspired by postcolonial imagination are necessary in our unrelenting pursuit for justice and a more inclusive Asian American Christian witness.

⁴⁴ Syngman Rhee, "Reconciliation: A Vision of Christian Mission," in *Teaching Mission in a Global Context*, eds. Patricia Lloyd-Sidle and Bonnie Sue Lewis (Louisville, KY: Geneva Press, 2001), 73.

Jerusalem, Samaria, and Sodom:
*A Sisterly Urban Triad in Ezekiel 16:44-63*¹

Gale A. Yee

It is with enormous pleasure that I contribute to this Festschrift for my dear colleague and friend, Dr. Kwok Pui-lan. In a dim sum restaurant after a Pacific Asian North American Asian Women in Theology and Ministry (PANAAWTM) meeting in Toronto back in 1998, Pui-lan passed around a xeroxed sheet to the faculty advisors, advertising a two-year interim position in Studies in Feminist Liberation Theologies at Episcopal Divinity School (EDS). Even though I was already a tenured full professor at my former institution, I eagerly applied and was hired for it. When the two years ended, I jubilantly became a tenured full professor at EDS. For 18 years, Pui-lan and I lived through the joys and sorrows of being colleagues at one of the most progressive, anti-racist, anti-oppression institutions in the US. She introduced me to postcolonial theory, which deeply influenced my work on Ezekiel 23 regarding the two sisters, Oholah (Samaria) and Oholibah (Jerusalem).² This essay will examine Ezek 16:44-63 by adding another sister, Sodom, to make a sororal trinity in Israel's sordid covenantal history with YHWH. It will argue that 16:44-63 reflects a post-582 BCE social landscape of Jews beyond the usual binary of Babylonia/Yehud (returning exiles/peoples of the land), to include ethnically and religiously mixed communities in Egypt (Sodom) and Samaria. In

¹ This essay was originally written for this Festschrift. It appears in revised form in my book *Towards an Asian-American Biblical Hermeneutics: An Intersectional Anthology* (Eugene: Cascade Books, 2021). I would like to thank Corrine L. Carvalho for her insightful feedback on this paper. Any mistakes are completely my own.

² Gale A. Yee, "The Two Sisters in Ezekiel: They Played the Whore in Egypt," in *Poor Banished Children of Eve: Woman as Evil in the Hebrew Bible* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2003), 111-34.

16:44-63, other voices emerge that present alternate understandings of Jewishness during the exilic period.

Like Ezekiel 23, Ezekiel 16 relates the history of YHWH's covenantal relationship with his people through a violent sexualized and racialized metaphor of a marriage gone wrong. YHWH becomes the cuckolded and shamed husband of Jerusalem, his fornicating wife. Although many feminists have analyzed and critiqued this chapter, they have primarily focused their attention on Ezek 16:1-43.³ I too have been guilty of this in my previous work on Ezekiel 16.⁴ Ezekiel 16:1-43 centers on the story of Jerusalem's birth as a newborn abandoned by her foreign parents (vv. 1-7), of her covenantal marriage to YHWH (vv. 8-14), of her idolatry and promiscuity with sexy foreign lovers (vv. 15-34), and her merciless punishment for betraying her marital vows (vv. 35-43).⁵ A rhetorical

³ Julie Galambush, *Jerusalem in the Book of Ezekiel: The City as Yahweh's Wife*, SBLDS (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1992); Mary E. Shields, "Multiple Exposures: Body Rhetoric and Gender Characterization in Ezekiel 16," *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion* 14, no. 1 (1998): 5-18; Linda M. Day, "Rhetoric and Domestic Violence in Ezekiel 16," *Biblical Interpretation* 8 (2000): 205-30; Peggy L. Day, "The Bitch Had It Coming to Her: Rhetoric and Interpretation in Ezekiel 16," *Biblical Interpretation* 8 (2000): 231-54; Peggy L. Day, "Adulterous Jerusalem's Imagined Demise: Death of a Metaphor in Ezekiel XVI," *Vetus Testamentum* 50 (2000): 285-309; Peggy L. Day, "A Prostitute Unlike Women: Whoring as Metaphoric Vehicle for Foreign Alliances," in *Israel's Prophets and Israel's Past: Essays on the Relationship of Prophetic Texts and Israelite History in Honor of John H. Hayes*, eds. Brad E. Kelle and Megan Bishop Moore (New York: T & T Clark, 2006), 167-73; Peggy L. Day, "Yahweh's Broken Marriages as Metaphoric Vehicle in the Hebrew Bible Prophets," in *Sacred Marriages: The Divine-Human Sexual Metaphor from Sumer to Early Christianity*, eds. Martti Nissinen and Risto Uro (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 2008), 219-41; S. Tamar Kamionkowski, "Gender Reversal in Ezekiel 16," in *The Prophets and Daniel, A Feminist Companion to the Bible* (Second Series), ed. Athalya Brenner (New York: Sheffield Academic Press, 2001), 170-85; Erin Runions, "Violence and the Economy of Desire in Ezekiel 16:1-45," in *The Prophets and Daniel, A Feminist Companion to the Bible* (Second Series), ed. Athalya Brenner (New York: Sheffield Academic Press, 2001), 156-69; Sharon Moughtin-Mumby, *Sexual and Marital Metaphors in Hosea, Jeremiah, Isaiah, and Ezekiel*, Oxford Theological Monographs (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 170.

⁴ Gale A. Yee, "'Your Mother was a Hittite': The Image of the Harlot in Ezekiel 16" (paper presentation, 1988 annual meeting of the Catholic Biblical Association, Santa Clara, CA); Gale A. Yee, "Spreading Your Legs to Anyone Who Passed: The Pornography of Ezekiel 16 and 23" (paper presentation, 1990 annual meeting of the Society of Biblical Literature, New Orleans, LA).

⁵ According to Brad Kelle, the prophetic imagery of physical and sexual violence *only* appears in the context of the destruction of a *city* that is personified as a woman.

tripling device⁶ unites 16:1-43 in the threefold references to the days of the woman's birth and youth (vv. 4, 22, 43) and to her stark nakedness (vv. 7, 22, 39). The third reference to Jerusalem's "days of your youth" in v. 43 seems to conclude the unit. YHWH declares that Jerusalem is punished, "because you have not remembered the days of your youth, but have enraged me with all these things; therefore, I have returned your deeds upon your heads, says the Lord God."⁷

Context

The introduction of Jerusalem's sisters, Samaria and Sodom, in 16:44-63 seems to signal a new unit and a new theme.⁸ For this reason, many feminists did not include these verses in their analyses, preferring to focus on the sexual violence in vv. 1-43. The question is whether vv. 44-63 are from the same author of vv. 1-43. I follow a number of scholars who see a three-fold division in the chapter: A (vv. 1-43); B (vv. 44-58); and C (vv. 59-63), although they differ in dealing with editorial provenance and dating of the sections.⁹ Ezekiel is customarily referred to as the prophet of the Babylonian exile. However, one must remember that there were several forced

Brad E. Kelle, "Wartime Rhetoric: Prophetic Metaphorization of Cities as Female," in *Writing and Reading War: Rhetoric, Gender, and Ethics in Biblical and Modern Contexts*, SBL Symposium, eds. Brad E. Kelle and Frank Ritzel Ames (Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2008), 98-101.

⁶ Cf. Boadt's suggestion that a rhetorical device of tripling connects Ezekiel 4-7. Lawrence Boadt, "Rhetorical Strategies in Ezekiel's Oracles of Judgment," in *Ezekiel and His Book: Textual and Literary Criticism and Their Interrelation*, ed. Johan Lust (Leuven: Leuven University Press, 1986), 188.

⁷ All translations from the NRSV unless otherwise noted.

⁸ Paul M. Joyce, *Ezekiel: A Commentary*, Library of Hebrew Bible/Old Testament Studies 482 (New York: T&T Clark, 2007), 133.

⁹ Walther Eichrodt, *Ezekiel: A Commentary*, Old Testament Library (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1970), 216-17; Leslie C. Allen, *Ezekiel 1-19*, Word Biblical Commentary (Dallas, TX: Word Books, Publisher, 1994), 233; Walther Zimmerli, *Ezekiel 1: A Commentary on the Book of the Prophet Ezekiel, Chapters 1-24* (Philadelphia, PA: Fortress, 1979), 333-35, 348-53; Moshe Greenberg, *Ezekiel 1-20: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary*, AB (Garden City: Doubleday, 1983), 292; Moshe Greenberg, "Ezekiel 16: A Panorama of Passions," in *Love and Death in the Ancient Near East*, eds. John H. Marks and Robert M. Good (Guilford, CT: Four Quarters Publishing Co., 1987), 143-45; Katheryn Pfisterer Darr, "The Book of Ezekiel. Introduction, Commentary, and Reflections," in *The New Interpreter's Bible*, Vol. 6 (Nashville: Abingdon, 2001), 1220-21; and Daniel I. Block, *The Book of Ezekiel: Chapters 1-24* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publ. Co., 1997), 464, recognize the three-part divisions but see more consistency in authorship.

migrations from Jerusalem and Judah to Babylonia, and the book of Ezekiel reflects this in its editorial history. According to 2 Kgs 24:10-17, king Jehoiachin, the queen mother, his officers, palace officials, and the elite of the land were taken in captivity from Jerusalem to Babylon. It is this forced migration that can properly be called an “exile.”¹⁰ Ezekiel the prophet-priest was most likely a part of this first-generation exiles in 597 BCE, ending up as a corvée laborer on the irrigation canals of Babylon with other displaced elites.¹¹ Because Judah was already a subjugated entity of the Babylonian empire, the forced migration that occurred when Nebuchadnezzar attacked Jerusalem a second time in 587 BCE (2 Kgs 25:1-21) should more correctly be termed “an internal displacement of peoples” from the periphery (Judah) to the center (Babylonia).¹² This migration witnessed the destruction of the Jerusalem temple. A third internal displacement to Babylonia occurred in 582 BCE, perhaps in retaliation for the assassination of Gedaliah, whom Nebuchadnezzar had installed as governor of those who remained in Judah (Jer 52:30; 2 Kgs 25:22-26).¹³ At the same time, another group in Judah, fearing Babylonian retribution, fled to Egypt, taking the prophet Jeremiah with them (Jer 43:4-7). Because this group voluntarily crossed international borders, they should be described as “refugees,” rather than exiles or internally displaced persons.¹⁴

¹⁰ John Ahn, “Forced Migrations Guiding the Exile: Demarcating 597, 587, and 582 B.C.E.,” in *By the Irrigation Canals of Babylon: Approaches to the Study of the Exile*, eds. John J. Ahn and Jill Middlemas (New York: Continuum International Publishing Group, 2012), 182.

¹¹ John Ahn, “Ezekiel 15: A *Mšl*,” in *The Prophets Speak on Forced Migration*, Ancient Israel and Its Literature 21, eds. Mark J. Boda et al. (Atlanta, GA: SBL Press, 2015), 103; Robert R. Wilson, “Forced Migration and the Formation of Prophetic Literature,” in *By the Irrigation Canals of Babylon: Approaches to the Study of the Exile*, eds. John J. Ahn and Jill Middlemas (New York: Continuum International Publishing Group, 2012), 103.

¹² Ahn, “Forced Migrations,” 182.

¹³ John W. Betlyon, “Neo-Babylonian Military Operations Other Than War in Judah and Jerusalem,” in *Judah and the Judeans in the Neo-Babylonian Period*, eds. Oded Lipschits and Joseph Blenkinsopp (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 2003), 266-67; Ralph W. Klein, “Exile,” in *The New Interpreter’s Dictionary of the Bible*, D-H Vol. 2, ed. Katharine Doob Sakenfeld (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 2007), 368.

¹⁴ Ahn, “Forced Migrations,” 183; Cf. Rainer Kessler, *The Social History of Ancient Israel: An Introduction* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2006), 126-27, who refers to this event as the Egyptian exile, although he does acknowledge that it was voluntary.

It is within this more nuanced understanding of “the exile” that we should situate Ezek 16:44-63. While A (vv. 1-43) was probably written before the destruction of Jerusalem and second deportation in 587 BCE,¹⁵ I will argue below that B (vv. 44-58) and C (vv. 59-63) were added to this core sometime after the third forced and voluntary migrations from Jerusalem in 582 BCE.¹⁶

We must also reckon with several social groups who had their own needs and concerns during this period of forced and voluntary migration.¹⁷ The *first* were those elites transported to Babylonia in the first exile in 597. This group was divided between those whom Jeremiah encouraged to “seek the welfare of the city” and come to terms with the major, urban and multicultural area of Babylon itself (Jer 29:5-7), and those like Ezekiel who were sent to dig in the remote, isolated, mono-ethnic setting of Babylonia’s irrigation ditches.¹⁸ It was this latter faction which developed a separatist ideology of “extreme exclusivity” over and against the *second* group, namely, those who remained in the land (2 Kgs 25:22; Jer 40:7-12).¹⁹

This second group continued to live south or north of Jerusalem, many as rural farmers, paying taxes in wine, oil, and other farm products, as they had done before Jerusalem’s destruction.²⁰ Specifically included in this group were the elites who

¹⁵ Zimmerli, *Ezekiel 1*, 348–50; Allen, *Ezekiel 1-19*, 233.

¹⁶ Cf. those who simply say that these verses are post-587: Allen, *Ezekiel 1-19*, 243; Zimmerli, *Ezekiel 1*, 348–50.

¹⁷ Jill Middlemas, *The Templeless Age: An Introduction to the History, Literature, and Theology of the “Exile,”* Kindle edition (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 2007), loc. 85–100; Dalit Rom-Shiloni, “Forced/Involuntary Migration, Diaspora Studies, and More: Notes on Methodologies,” *Hebrew Bible and Ancient Israel* 7, no. 3 (2018): 384–89.

¹⁸ Distinguishing here between the city of Babylon and the country it is set in, viz. Babylonia. C.A. Strine, “Is ‘Exile’ Enough? Jeremiah, Ezekiel, and the Need for a Taxonomy of Involuntary Migration,” *Hebrew Bible and Ancient Israel* 7, no. 3 (2018): 291; Laurie E. Pearce, “Continuity and Normality in Sources Relating to the Judean Exile,” *Hebrew Bible and Ancient Israel* 3, no. 2 (2014): 180. Rom-Shiloni contends that there were no internal differences or conflicts between these two communities in exile. Rom-Shiloni, “Forced/Involuntary Migration,” 397.

¹⁹ Dalit Rom-Shiloni, “Ezekiel as the Voice of the Exiles and Constructor of Exilic Ideology,” *Hebrew Union College Annual* 76 (2005): 1–45.

²⁰ Oded Lipschits, “Shedding New Light on the Dark Years of the ‘Exilic Period’: New Studies, Further Elucidation, and Some Questions Regarding the Archaeology of Judah as an ‘Empty Land,’” in *Interpreting Exile: Displacement and Deportation in Biblical and Modern Contexts*, Society of Biblical Literature Ancient Israel and Its Literature, Vol. 10, eds. Brad E. Kelle, Frank Rithchel Ames, and Jacob L. Wright,

were still functioning in Jerusalem (2 Kgs 25:1-21). These elites were excoriated by Ezekiel (cf. Ezek 33:23-29), who depicted them metaphorically as YHWH's unfaithful wife of foreign origin who is doomed to destruction in Ezek 16:1-43 (A).²¹ They became a segment of the 587 BCE forced migration. Those who were not deported in either 587 or 582 BCE, the so-called "poorest of the land" (2 Kgs 24:14; 25:12; Jer 39:10; 40:7; 52:16), took over the lands and vineyards of the elites and, urged on by Gedaliah at Mizpah, produced a plentiful economic harvest of summer fruits and oil (Jer 40:9-10). Undoubtedly, a good portion of this harvest was destined as taxes for their Babylonian overlords.²² Joining these farmers were many Judeans who had fled to Moab, Ammon, and Edom because of the conflicts (Jer 40:11-12). These ex-patriots returned to Judah when they heard that the Babylonians left a remnant in Judah, appointing Gedaliah as governor. It is not inconceivable that in joining the remnant in working the land, they brought with them Moabite, Ammonite, and Edomite spouses and children, creating more ethnically mixed communities in Judah after 582 BCE.²³

The *third* population were those Judeans who had settled, evidently for some time before the exile, "in the land of Egypt, at Migdol, at Tahpanhes, at Memphis, and in the land of Pathros" (Jer 44:1).²⁴ By the late sixth century, a Jewish military colony was in place at the island of Elephantine in Upper Egypt. More about this colony and its origins will be discussed below. Besides these settlements in Egypt, we must also include the communities of those Judean men and women who fled to Egypt after Gedaliah's assassination (Jer 43:4-7).²⁵ Each of these social groupings will figure in some way in Ezekiel's prophecy.

(Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2011), 73-85.

²¹ Rom-Shiloni, "Ezekiel as the Voice of the Exiles," 20-34.

²² J. N. Graham, "Vinedressers and Plowmen: 2 Kings 25:12 and Jeremiah 52:16," *Biblical Archaeologist* 47, no. 1 (1984): 55-58.

²³ Ahn, "Ezekiel 15: A Mšl," 115-16; Kessler, *The Social History of Ancient Israel*, 122-23.

²⁴ John S. Holladay, "Judeans (and Phoenicians) in Egypt in the Late Seventh to Sixth Centuries B.C.," in *Egypt, Israel, and the Ancient Mediterranean World: Studies in Honor of Donald B. Redford*, eds. Gary N. Knoppers and Antoine Hirsch (Leiden and Boston: Brill, 2004), 423-29.

²⁵ Kessler, *The Social History of Ancient Israel*, 126-27; Bob Becking, "A Fragmented History of the Exile," in *Interpreting Exile: Displacement and Deportation in Biblical and Modern Contexts*, Society of Biblical Literature Ancient Israel and Its Literature, Vol. 10, eds. Brad E. Kelle, Frank Ritche Ames, and Jacob L. Wright (Atlanta: Society of

Analysis

In 16:44, the literary character known as Ezekiel²⁶ continues his diatribe against the capital city Jerusalem and her elites by lobbing a proverb²⁷ against her foreign parentage: “Like mother, like daughter.” We are reminded of her loathsome pedigree in v. 45, “your mother was a Hittite, your father an Amorite,” inverting the previous accusation that begins his oracle in v. 3, in order to focus on Jerusalem’s mother. By betraying her husband YHWH (vv. 15-34), Jerusalem is like her Hittite mother, who also loathed her husband. Historically, Jerusalem was actually a Jebusite city before it was conquered by David (2 Sam 5:6-10//1 Chr 11:4-9), but by highlighting her Hittite and Amorite ancestry, Ezekiel binds Jerusalem with the seven peoples of Canaan, whom God commanded Israel to drive out (Josh 3:10, 24.11; Deut 7:1). Hittite women particularly are censured as marital partners for Israelite men because of their foreignness. For example, Rebekah relates her fears to Isaac that Jacob will marry a Hittite woman just like his brother Esau (Gen 27:34, 46). Or, the downfall of king Solomon will be his foreign wives, which included Hittite women (1 Kgs 11:1).²⁸

Complicating the dysfunctional family history is the fact that Jerusalem’s Hittite mother not only loathes her Amorite husband but also her children. These include not only Jerusalem herself, but also her sisters, Samaria and Sodom. And like Jerusalem, these sisters are guilty of despising their own husbands and children (vv. 45-46). This antipathy toward one’s spouses and children has been described as

Biblical Literature, 2011), 156-57.

²⁶ “The reader of the final form of the text should also recognize that the author and Ezekiel are not identical: Ezekiel is a character within the prophetic narrative, through whom the reader experiences the exile.” Corrine L Patton, “Priest, Prophet, and Exile: Ezekiel as a Literary Construct,” in *Ezekiel’s Hierarchical World: Wrestling with a Tiered Reality*, ed. Stephen L. Cook (Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2004), 73.

²⁷ In Hebrew, *mashal*. According to Polk, the *mashal* is not a neutral saying, but one that should issue in a judgment: “The *māšāl* forces upon Jerusalem a self-evaluation, one with an obvious enough conclusion, which, were it taken to heart, should issue in shame and disgrace (v. 52); and, on from that, in aid to the poor and needy (v. 49), renewed covenant and a true knowledge of God (vv. 60-63).” Timothy Polk, “Paradigms, Parables, and *Mešālîm*: On Reading the *Māšal* in Scripture,” *Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 45, no. 4 (1983): 575.

²⁸ For more on the Hittites, see Gregory McMahon, “The History of the Hittites,” *Biblical Archaeologist* 52, no. 2 and 3 (1989): 62-77.

a “hereditary defect of character” that runs in the family because of the sisters' foreign progenitors.²⁹

The NRSV translates the description of Samaria as the “elder” sister (*haggedolah*) and of Sodom as the “younger” one (*haqqetannah*). However, both Jerusalem and Sodom are actually older than Samaria. Jerusalem existed before Samaria was established by king Omri (1 Kgs 16:2 3-24) and Sodom was a city-state during the so-called Patriarchal period (Gen 13:12-13). The comparison among the three cities is only effective if their descriptions refer to geographic size.³⁰ Therefore, Jerusalem’s bigger sister is Samaria, the former capital of the kingdom of Israel to her north, the traditional home of the ten tribes. To her south is her smaller sister, the city of Sodom, whose actual location is debated. Although Sodom is claimed to be north of the Dead Sea,³¹ the more persuasive evidence points to a location southeast of the Dead Sea.³² In our text, Jerusalem is geographically positioned between these northern and southern cities.

Both Samaria and Sodom are said to have daughters (*benotehah*, v. 46). Given the geographic thrust of the passage, these daughters are the dependent towns of the cities.³³ These daughters also

²⁹ Marvin H. Pope, “Mixed Marriage Metaphor in Ezekiel 16,” in *Fortunate the Eyes That See: Essays in Honor of David Noel Freedman in Celebration of His Seventieth Birthday*, ed. Astrid B. Beck (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1995), 394-95.

³⁰ See Block, *The Book of Ezekiel: Chapters 1-24*, 507, 256n; also, Allen, *Ezekiel 1-19*, 244.

³¹ Steven Collins, “Where Is Sodom? The Case for Tall El-Hammam,” *Biblical Archaeology Review* 39, no. 2 (March 2013): 32.

³² Walter W. Rast, “Bab Edh-Dhra and the Origin of the Sodom Saga,” in *Archaeology and Biblical Interpretation: Essays in Memory of D Glenn Rose*, eds. Leo G. Perdue, Lawrence E. Toombs, and Gary L. Johnson (Atlanta, GA: John Knox Press, 1987), 196-97; David M. Howard Jr., “Sodom and Gomorrah Revisited,” *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 27, no. 4 (December 1984): 399-400; Herschel Shanks, “Have Sodom and Gomorrah Been Found?,” *Biblical Archaeology Review* 6, no. 5 (1980): 26-36; Claus Westermann, *Genesis 1-11: A Commentary* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Publishing House, 1984), 300; Bill T. Arnold, *Genesis, The New Cambridge Bible Commentary* (Cambridge; New York: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 184.

³³ According to Josh 15:45, Ekron has its “daughters” (*benotehah*) or satellite dependencies. See also Josh 17:11; Num 21:25; Jer 49:2. Allen, *Ezekiel 1-19*, 244; Zimmerli, *Ezekiel 1*, 350; Marvin A. Sweeney, *Reading Ezekiel: A Literary and Theological Commentary*, Reading the Old Testament Series (Macon, Georgia: Smyth & Helwys Publishing, 2013), 87.

manifest the foreignness of their mothers. Along with these “nieces,” Jerusalem too has her own satellite towns or “daughters” (v. 48). The focus on these cities with their dependencies will be important for the interpretation of this passage, as we will see. Ezekiel accuses Jerusalem of following in the ways of Sodom and Samaria according to their abominations (*to'evot*) and becoming even more corrupt than they (v. 47).³⁴ Traditionally, Sodom is the archetypically wicked and sinful city,³⁵ which God destroys because of its iniquity.³⁶ A smattering of biblical verses,³⁷ such as Gen 19:1-28 about the attempted male-to-male rape of Lot's two guests at Sodom, have become proof texts against homosexual desire and relationships for some evangelical Christians.³⁸ However, studies that contextualize same-sex relations within the ancient Mediterranean milieu of sexuality provide a more balanced interpretation of the biblical text.³⁹ Inhospitability to the male guest is Sodom's most likely transgression in Genesis 19.⁴⁰ From a literary perspective, this

³⁴ According to Goldstein, sexuality was never a core issues for *to'evot*, “abominations.” The core concern of *to'evot* was idolatry and foreign cultic practices, and it became sexualized in the marriage metaphor of Ezekiel: “*Toevah* is what is unacceptable to the community – i.e., what is inherently dangerous to one's identity as an Israelite.” Seth Goldstein, “Reading *Toevah*: Biblical Scholarship and Difficult Texts,” *The Reconstructionist* 67, no. 2 (2003): 53–57; for another take, see Ken Stone, “The Hermeneutics of Abomination: On Gay Men, Canaanites, and Biblical Interpretation,” *Biblical Theology Bulletin* 27, no. 2 (1997): 36–41.

³⁵ Gen 13:12; Gen 18:20; Deut 32:32; Isa 3.9; Jer 23:14.

³⁶ Deut 29:23; Isa 13:19; Jer 49:18; Jer 50:40; Lam 4:6; Amos 4:11; 2 Esdr 2:8; Matt 10:15.

³⁷ Besides Genesis 19:1–28, see Lev 18:22; Lev 20:13; Rom 1:26–28; 1 Cor 6:9; 1 Tim 1:10.

³⁸ Cf. Brian Neil Peterson, “The Sin of Sodom Revisited: Reading Genesis 19 in Light of Torah,” *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 59, no. 1 (March 2016): 17–31; Robert A. J. Gagnon, *The Bible and Homosexual Practice* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon, 2001); Robert A. J. Gagnon, “The Old Testament and Homosexuality: A Critical Review of the Case Made by Phyllis Bird,” *Die Zeitschrift Für Die Alttestamentliche Wissenschaft* 117, no. 3 (2005): 367–94.

³⁹ Martti Nissinen, *Homoeroticism in the Biblical World: A Historical Perspective*, trans. Kirsi Stjerna (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1998); David Tabb Stewart, “Same-Sex Relations: Hebrew Bible,” in *The Oxford Encyclopedia of the Bible and Gender Studies*, ed. Julia M. O'Brien (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2014).

⁴⁰ Victor H. Matthews, “Hospitality and Hostility in Genesis 19 and Judges 19,” *Biblical Theology Bulletin* 22 (1992): 3–11; Scott Morschauser, “‘Hospitality’, Hostiles and Hostages: On the Legal Background to Genesis 19.1–9,” *Journal for the Study of the Old Testament* 27, no. 4 (2003): 461–85. On the importance of hospitality in the social world in which ancient Israel is embedded, see, Michael Herzfeld, “‘As in

inhospitality toward the stranger contrasts with both Abraham's and Lot's hospitality toward God's messengers (Gen 18:1-8 and Gen 19:1-3, respectively).⁴¹ In commissioning his followers, Jesus warns that it will be more tolerable for Sodom than for any town that does not welcome them hospitably (Luke 10:10-12). It was only in later Jewish and Christian traditions that Sodom became a signifier of sexual sins in their interpretations of Gen 19:1-28.⁴²

Ezekiel is very precise about Sodom's guilt or iniquity (*'awon*): She and her "daughters" had pride, excess of food, and prosperous ease, but did not aid the poor and needy (v. 49). There is no mention here of the male-to-male gang rape of Genesis 19.⁴³ Rather, Sodom is guilty of arrogance, gluttony, materialistic comfort, and neglect of the impoverished and destitute. In Sodom, we encounter an economically stratified urban center whose wealth and greed has made them proud and indifferent to the marginal populations within it. Israelite and Jewish traditions support Ezekiel's particular denunciation of Sodom's social injustices recounted here. The prophet Isaiah scathingly addresses the leaders and people of Jerusalem as "you rulers of Sodom, you people of Gomorrah" (Isa 1:10). After spurning their sacrifices and feasts, God commands them to "cease to do evil, learn to do good; seek justice, rescue the oppressed, defend the orphan, plead for the widow" (Isa 1:16-17). Isaiah accuses Jerusalem of being a prostitute (*zonah*), connecting this to her lack of justice and righteousness, and the oppression and thievery of her leaders who do not defend the orphan or the widow's cause (Isa 1:21-23). Sirach 16:7-8 and 3 Macc 2:4-5 condemn both the giants of Genesis 6 and the inhabitants of Sodom for their arrogance

Your Own House': Hospitality, Ethnography, and the Stereotype of Mediterranean Society," in *Honor and Shame and the Unity of the Mediterranean*, ed. David D. Gilmore (Washington, DC: American Anthropological Association, 1987), 75-89.

⁴¹ Robert Alter, "Sodom as Nexus: The Web of Design in Biblical Narrative," in *The Book and the Text: The Bible and Literary Theory*, ed. Regina M. Schwartz (Cambridge, MA: Basil Blackwell, 1990), 150-51; Nissinen, *Homoeroticism in the Biblical World*, 47-48.

⁴² See the conclusions of Carden's extensive study: Michael Carden, *Sodomy: A History of a Christian Biblical Myth*, 1st ed., Bible World (London: Equinox Pub., 2004), 76-77.

⁴³ Thus, Block, *The Book of Ezekiel: Chapters 1-24*, 509; Marten H. Woudstra, "The Everlasting Covenant in Ezek 16:59-63," *Calvin Theological Journal* 6, no. 1 (April 1971): 36; *pace* Brian Neil Peterson, "Identifying the Sin of Sodom in Ezekiel 16:49-50," *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society*. 61, no. 2 (2018): 307-20.

and trust in their strength. Both were destroyed because they committed injustices (3 Macc 2:4).⁴⁴

According to Carden, references to Sodom and Gomorrah are pervasive in rabbinic literature, highlighting their oppression, injustice, and hostility towards strangers. In particular, the hospitality of Abraham and Lot is contrasted with the inhospitality of Sodom in Genesis 19.⁴⁵ Relevant for Ezek 16:48-50 is *Pirḳê de Rabbi Eliezer* 25.⁴⁶ According to Rabbi Ze'era, the men of Sodom were wealthy and prosperous because of the fertility of their land and their mother lodes of gold and precious stones. In their arrogance, they trusted not their Creator, but their immense wealth. Their lack of hospitality is exhibited in the wall they built around their fruit trees so that the traveler and the stranger could not partake from them.⁴⁷ According to Rabbi Jehudah, a proclamation was made in Sodom that whoever gave bread to the poor and needy shall be burnt by fire. One of these "offenders" was Lot's own daughter Peletith, who was married to one of Sodom's peers. Feeding a poor man on the street from her household provisions, she is condemned to die by fire. She prays to God, "Maintain my right and my cause at the hands of the men of Sodom," and God hears her cry.⁴⁸ These various traditions cumulatively attest to Ezekiel's depiction of Sodom's manifold offenses.

⁴⁴ Carden, *Sodomy*, 47–48.

⁴⁵ Carden, *Sodomy*, 86, 113, and the rest of Chapter 4.

⁴⁶ Eighth to ninth century CE. I am relying here on the page numbers of the Friedlander translation. *Pirḳê de Rabbi Eliezer*, *Pirḳê de Rabbi Eliezer* = (*The Chapters of Rabbi Eliezer, the Great*): According to the Text of the Manuscript Belonging to Abraham Epstein of Vienna), trans. Gerald Friedlander (London: Kegan Paul, 1916).

⁴⁷ *Eliezer*, *Pirḳê de Rabbi Eliezer*, 181–82. See also *Tosefta Sotah* 3:2, accessed in Sefaria, June 25, 2020, 1:34 PM. In his condemnation of Sodom, Rabbi Joshua, son of Korchah, cites Ezek 16:49: "Behold, this was the iniquity of thy sister Sodom: pride, fullness of bread, and prosperous ease was in her and her daughters, but she did not strengthen the poor and needy."

⁴⁸ *Eliezer*, *Pirḳê de Rabbi Eliezer*, 182–83. Peletith is nameless in *Sanhedrin* 109b:9, where her punishment for feeding the poor is more gruesomely described. She is covered with honey and put on the city wall to be attacked by hornets. Her act of kindness and her horrific execution that followed sealed the fate of Sodom's destruction. Accessed in Sefaria, William Davidson edition, June 25, 2020, 12:57 PM. See also the rendition in Louis Ginzberg, Henrietta Szold, and Paul Radin, *Legends of the Jews*, Vol. 2, JPS Classic Reissues (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 2003), 209.

Turning to the bigger sister, Ezekiel only accuses Samaria of not committing half the sins of Jerusalem (v. 51a). Unlike Sodom's, these sins are not specified. Verse 47 declares that Jerusalem not only followed in the ways of the two cities but became more corrupt than them. Therefore, the catalogue of Sodom's offenses rhetorically presumes that Jerusalem was even more abominable in her own pride, excess of food, prosperous ease, and her neglect of the poor and needy, than her sister.⁴⁹ Ezekiel contains a number of oracles condemning Jerusalem's own social injustices. Ezekiel 18:7-8 extols the righteous man – who does not oppress anyone but restores to the debtor his pledge, commits no robbery, gives his bread to the hungry and covers the naked with a garment, does not take advance or accrued interest, withholds his hand from iniquity, executes true justice between contending parties – and reviles the man who does not (18:12-13). Ezekiel 22:7 denounces the “princes of Israel” in Jerusalem who extort the alien living within her and oppress the orphan and widow. He continues in 22:12 to condemn those who take bribes for murder, overcharge interest on loans, and profit from extortion. In 34:1-6, he lambasts the “shepherds of Israel” for their gluttony and materialism, and for not feeding their people, strengthening the weak, healing the sick, or binding up the injured in their charge.⁵⁰ The abominations of Jerusalem in these social injustices make both these errant sisters of hers appear righteous in their stead (16:51b). The favorable judgment for her sisters, in spite of their corruption, is intended to make Jerusalem feel a profound shame for her own deeds.⁵¹

Bear your disgrace, you also, for you have brought about for your sisters a more favorable judgment; because of your sins in which you acted more abominably than they, they are more in the right than you. So be ashamed, you also, and bear your disgrace, for you have made your sisters appear righteous (v. 52).

⁴⁹ Eichrodt, *Ezekiel: A Commentary*, 215.

⁵⁰ On social justice in Ezekiel, see Andrew Mein, *Ezekiel and the Ethics of Exile*, Oxford Theological Monographs (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), 94–100.

⁵¹ Regarding shame as self-awareness, see Jacqueline E. Lapsley, “Shame and Self-Knowledge: The Positive Role of Shame in Ezekiel's View of the Moral Self,” in *The Book of Ezekiel: Theological and Anthropological Perspectives*, eds. Margaret S. Odell and John T. Strong (Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2000), 163–68.

Who are Samaria and Sodom?

Before we proceed, let us ask why the feminized Samaria and Sodom become signifiers to highlight Jerusalem's own crimes. The most obvious reason is that they are both cities that enflamed God's wrath so much by their sinfulness that God destroyed them.⁵² By comparing Jerusalem to these destroyed cities, Ezekiel assumes Jerusalem's apparent fate as well. Ezekiel also highlights the foreign ethnic parentage that they share with Jerusalem. The geographical locations of Sodom, south of Jerusalem, may refer to mixed ethnic farming communities in Judah after 582 BCE, that formed when Judeans who fled to Moab, Edom, and Ammon returned with their spouses and children (see above). Clues for the text's interpretation also lie in the mention of the "daughters," or dependent towns/villages of these cities. Astonishingly, God will restore "the fortunes of Sodom and her daughters and Samaria and her daughters" and restore Jerusalem and her daughters along with theirs, so that Jerusalem will become more disgraced and ashamed (vv. 53-54). God will restore Sodom, Samaria, and their towns to their former state, and Jerusalem and her towns along with them (v. 55). At the beginning of this passage, Ezekiel accuses Jerusalem, Sodom, and Samaria of being offspring of foreign ethnicities (vv. 44-45). In contrast to the ideology of the "empty land," that the land was supposedly empty because the true "people of Israel" were in the Babylonian diaspora,⁵³ mixed ethnic communities ("daughters") already inhabit the land and will, according to 16:55, to be restored to their former state.

Along with those who already exist in the land, we must also remember that two competing centers exist in the Judean diaspora, particularly after the 582 BCE forced and voluntary migrations. These centers are Babylon and Egypt, although the one that becomes normative biblically will be the former.⁵⁴ Egypt has been allied with

⁵² Thus, Eichrodt, *Ezekiel: A Commentary*, 214-15; and Woudstra, "The Everlasting Covenant in Ezek 16:59-63," 35. Eichrodt thinks that Samaria and Sodom were "capriciously chosen" as Jerusalem's sisters. I will argue differently.

⁵³ Hans M. Barstad, *The Myth of the Empty Land: A Study in the History and Archaeology of Judah during the 'Exilic' Period*, Symbolae Osloenses (Oslo: Scandinavian University Press, 1996); Hans M. Barstad, "After the 'Myth of the Empty Land': Major Challenges in the Study of Neo-Babylonian Judah," in *Judah and the Judeans in the Neo-Babylonian Period*, eds. Oded Lipschits and Joseph Blenkinsopp (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 2003), 3-20.

⁵⁴ With grateful thanks to John Ahn for pointing me in this direction and directing

Judah several times during the course of its history, and its attraction to Judeans lies not only in its military support but also in its agrarian economic power.⁵⁵ I mentioned previously the flight of elite Judean refugees in 582 BCE after the assassination of the Babylonian-appointed governor Gedaliah, and their settling in the already established Israelite communities in Egypt (Jer 44:1). In response to Jeremiah's warnings that war and famine will overwhelm the refugees in Egypt because of their worship of other deities (Jer 44:1-14), many rebuke him, saying that they and their ancestors have always prospered while they offered libations to the queen of heaven, but now suffer war and famine when they ceased presenting them (Jer 44:15-19). In short, the exilic population in Egypt, just like their pre-exilic ancestors in Judah, is a mixed lot.⁵⁶

Augmenting this exilic diversity in Egypt, the community of Elephantine has its own complex diasporic history. According to Van der Toorn, the ancestors of the Elephantine Jews were from Jerusalem's northern sister Samaria rather than from Judah.⁵⁷ Based on his analysis of Papyrus Amherst 63, Van der Toorn argues that a group of Samaritans⁵⁸ fled to Judah at the time of its fall in 721 BCE, becoming mercenaries under Judean command. When the Assyrians under Sennacherib attacked Judah, they fled again, this time north to Palmyra in Aram (Syria).⁵⁹ In Palmyra, they encounter and

me to the work of Gary Knoppers and Karel Van der Toorn.

⁵⁵ Corrine L. Carvalho, "A Serpent in the Nile: Egypt in the Book of Ezekiel," in *Concerning the Nations: Essays on the Oracles against the Nations in Isaiah, Jeremiah and Ezekiel*, The Library of Hebrew Bible/Old Testament Studies, 1st ed., eds. Else K. Holt, Hyun Chul Paul Kim, and Andrew Mein (London: Bloomsbury T&T Clark, 2014), 205.

⁵⁶ Gary N Knoppers, "Exile, Return and Diaspora: Expatriates and Repatriates in Late Biblical Literature," in *Texts, Contexts and Readings in Postexilic Literature: Explorations into Historiography and Identity Negotiation in Hebrew Bible and Related Texts*, Forschungen zum alten Testament. 2. Reihe 53, ed. Louis C. Jonker (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2011), 41.

⁵⁷ Karel Van der Toorn, *Becoming Diaspora Jews: Behind the Story of Elephantine*, Anchor Yale Bible Reference Library (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2019), 3.

⁵⁸ Both Van der Toorn and Knoppers refer to the residents of Yehud and Samaria (Assyria province of Samerina) as Judeans and Samaritans to distinguish them from the later Jews and Samaritans of the later Roman period. Gary N. Knoppers, *Jews and Samaritans: The Origins and History of Their Early Relations* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2013), 14-15.

⁵⁹ Van der Toorn, *Becoming Diaspora Jews*, 87-88. For an abbreviated version of Van der Toorn's thesis, see Karel Van der Toorn, "Egyptian Papyrus Sheds New Light on Jewish History," *Biblical Archaeology Review* 44, no. 4 (2018): 33-39, 66-68.

intermingle with ethnically and religiously pluralistic populations of Syrians and Babylonians, relinquishing their Hebrew language in favor of Aramean. Sometime toward the end of the seventh century BCE, a significant population from Syria and Palestine journey to Egypt, drawn by the promise of houses, land, and perhaps salary in exchange for military service at Elephantine. They continue to worship their warrior god Yaho as they did in Samaria and Palmyra, equating him with the storm god Bethel as well as adopting several Aramean deities associated with Bethel.⁶⁰ Because of a completely different diasporic history than those of the Babylonian diaspora, the Elephantine Jews had a mixed ethnic and religious ancestry:

At Elephantine, it was possible to be a Jew and a polytheist. It was possible to be a Jew and have your own temple far away from Jerusalem. It was possible to be a Jew, marry an Egyptian wife, and still have Jewish children. It was possible to be a Jew and never read the Torah because there was, as yet, no Torah. To anyone who hears it, the story of the Elephantine community is a reminder of the fact that the story of the Jews has many chapters. To believe that every chapter tells the same story in a slightly different way would be a big mistake.⁶¹

A connection between Egypt and Sodom appears in Wis 19:13-17. Sodom “had refused to receive strangers when they came to them,” but Egypt is far worse in making “slaves of guests who were their benefactors” (Wis 19:14). An even stronger analogy between Egypt and Sodom is found in a celebratory poem in the later Samaritan text *Memar Marqah*, comparing Moses and Aaron who enter Egypt with the two angels who enter Sodom:

How excellent to see them (Moses and Aaron) enter Egypt like the two angels who entered Sodom! //The two angels entered Sodom at eventide, sent to open the storehouse of wrath upon all the inhabitants therein. //Moses and Aaron

Van der Toorn, “Egyptian Papyrus.”

⁶⁰ Van der Toorn, *Becoming Diaspora Jews*, 87–88, 102–3.

⁶¹ Van der Toorn, 147. Both Knoppers and Granerød concur that in the Neo-Babylonian and Persian periods, there were multiple and multi-dimensional Yahwisms. Knoppers, “Exile, Return and Diaspora,” 46; Gard Granerød, *Dimensions of Yahwism in the Persian Period: Studies in the Religion and Society of the Judaean Community at Elephantine*, Beihefte zur Zeitschrift für die alttestamentliche Wissenschaft (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2016), 2–3.

entered Egypt at eventide, sent to open the storehouse of judgement therein. //The angels were sent to destroy Sodom. Moses and Aaron were sent to destroy Egypt. //The angels ate unleavened bread in Sodom. Moses and Aaron celebrated the feast of unleavened bread in Egypt. //The angels burnt the young in the deep. Moses and Aaron smote Pishon, tributary of Eden. //The angels drove Lot out in the morning. Moses and Aaron led the Israelites out before morning (MM I§3).⁶²

The link between Egypt and Sodom is a tradition that is carried over in the triangulation of Sodom, Egypt, and Jerusalem in Rev 11:8. The implication to be drawn in Ezek 16:46 is that Jerusalem's southern sister Sodom and her "daughters" become signifiers for the diverse Judean communities in Egypt in this passage. Although speculative, the prophet appropriates a very sinful city south of Jerusalem, already entrenched in the tradition as one destroyed by God, as his avatar for Judean settlements in Egypt. While the author of Ezek 16:1-43 reflects the "extreme exclusivity" of Babylonian exiles and the book itself, Ezek 16:44-58, written after the 582 BCE forced and voluntary migrations, suggests a perspective that is cognizant of Judean communities in Egypt that have different experiences of diaspora. Assuming Van der Toorn is correct about the origin of the Elephantine Jews, this perspective will also include communities of Jerusalem's sister Samaria. These communities are ethnically, religiously, and culturally more diverse than the Judean elites in Babylonia. Ezekiel accuses them of being like Sodom: sinful because of their pride, excess of food, prosperous ease, and neglect of the poor and needy (16:49). Nevertheless, while Sodom and Samaria are still abominable in their sinful ways, these sisters will be judged more favorably and appear more righteous when compared to Jerusalem's own transgressions and shame (v. 52).

The prophet continues by declaring that YHWH will restore the fortunes of Sodom, Samaria, and their daughters (v. 53a). Jerusalem's fortunes will also be restored along with her sisters and nieces, but only to compel her to bear her disgrace and be ashamed (v. 53b-54). The promised restoration of Samaria and her daughters/towns by YHWH will actually come to pass in the future (vv. 55). In contrast to Judah, the region of Samaria seemed to have

⁶² Cited in Carden, *Sodomy*, 48–49n3.

escaped large-scale destruction by the Babylonians.⁶³ While some of its population eventually landed in Elephantine, the population in Samaria itself was an ethnic mix of mostly former Israelites and foreign populations transplanted earlier by the Assyrians and absorbed into the local population (Cf. 2 Kgs 17:24-41).⁶⁴ After 582 BCE, Samaria and her dependent towns were developing into the larger and more prosperous entity that will confront the Babylonian elites in Yehud when they return: "During the Achaemenid era, members of the Judean elite were not dealing with a depopulated outback to the north. Quite the contrary, they were dealing with a province that was larger, better-established, wealthier, and considerably more populous than Yehud."⁶⁵

The restoration of the fortunes and former state of Sodom and her daughters (v. 53-55) is problematic if, as argued, it represents the communities in Egypt. Perhaps what is also alluded to here is the revitalization of Sodom's southern location around the Dead Sea and its environs in Judah (Ezek 47:3-12; cf. Zech 14:8).⁶⁶ Or more likely, it may refer to God's restoration of those scattered in Egypt, who will return to the land under the united kingdom of Israel and Judah:

⁶³ Adam Zertal, "The Province of Samaria (Assyrian Samerina) in the Late Iron Age (Iron Age III)," in *Judah and the Judeans in the Neo-Babylonian Period*, eds. Oded Lipschits and Joseph Blenkinsopp (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 2003), 405-6; Gary N. Knoppers, "Revisiting the Samaritan Question in the Persian Period," in *Judah and the Judeans in the Persian Period*, eds. Oded Lipschitz and Manfred Oeming (Winona Lake, Ind: Eisenbrauns, 2006), 272.

⁶⁴ Knoppers disagrees with both the maximalist position (that maintains a great devastation of Samaria by the Assyrians and massive bi-directional populations exchange between Samaria and Assyria) and the minimalist position (that the conquests of Samaria were mainly localized at major urban centers). Rather, the picture is mixed. There was not wholesale replacement of one population with another, but rather a diminution of the local population. The number of foreign transplants was not high, and seemed to have been gradually absorbed into the local population. The religious divergence of Samaria from the normative Yahwism in the Deuteronomistic history is due to the resurgence during the exilic/post-exilic periods of the "old time religion" of YHWH practiced in the former northern kingdom. The springboard of Knoppers thesis here is 2 Kgs 17:25-28, which describes the Assyrian king repatriating an exiled Samaritan priest to teach the foreign settlers of the God of the land, taking up residence at one of the former major Israelite sanctuaries, Bethel. Knoppers, *Jews and Samaritans: The Origins and History of Their Early Relations*, 21-44, 48-57.

⁶⁵ Knoppers, "Revisiting the Samaritan Question," 272-73.

⁶⁶ Block, *The Book of Ezekiel: Chapters 1-24*, 513; Zimmerli, *Ezekiel 1*, 352.

I will take the people of Israel from the nations among which they have gone, and will gather them from every quarter, and bring them to their own land. I will make them one nation in the land, on the mountains of Israel; and one king shall be king over them all. Never again shall they be two nations, and never again shall they be divided into two kingdoms (Ezek 37:21-23).⁶⁷

In any case, both the restorations of Samaria, Sodom, and their daughters serve not to return them to their former wickedness, but to compel Jerusalem to suffer her own disgrace and shame (vv. 53-54). Contrasting Jerusalem with Sodom, the prophet declares: “Was not your sister Sodom a byword in your mouth in the day of your pride, before your wickedness was uncovered? Now you are a mockery to the daughters of Aram and all her neighbors, and to the daughters of the Philistines, those all around who despise you. *You*⁶⁸ must bear the penalty of your lewdness and abominations, says the Lord” (vv. 56-58, italics in the text).

We now arrive at the concluding verses of Ezek 16:59-63 (C). Most likely written by the author of vv. 44-58 (B), they recapitulate themes found in both vv. 1-43 (A) and (B).⁶⁹ Although Jerusalem flagrantly broke the covenant (v. 59) that she entered with YHWH (v. 8), YHWH will establish an “everlasting covenant” with her (*berit ’olam*, v. 60).⁷⁰ In contrast to Jerusalem, who did not remember (*zkr*) the days of her youth (vv. 4, 22, 43), YHWH⁷¹ will remember (*zkr*) the covenant he made with her in the days of her youth (v. 60). Jerusalem will in turn remember (*zkr*) her sinful ways and be ashamed, when God takes her bigger and smaller sisters, Samaria and Sodom, and gives them to her as daughters (v. 61), perhaps alluding to the eventual reunification of Israel and Judah. As Jerusalem’s daughters, Samaria and Sodom will be included in the same *berit ’olam*.

If Sodom and her daughters stand for Egypt, and Samaria and her daughters represent the former northern kingdom, whom does Jerusalem personify? There are two possibilities: the ethnically

⁶⁷ Such a promise of restored unification was also uttered by pre-exilic prophets: Amos 9:11-12; Hos 3:5; Mic 5:2-5; and the exilic prophet, Jer 30:1-17.

⁶⁸ With the emphatic “You” (*’at*).

⁶⁹ Zimmerli, *Ezekiel 1*, 352.

⁷⁰ Cf. also Ezek 37:26.

⁷¹ With the emphatic “I” (*’ani*).

mixed groups living in Yehud or the Babylonian exiles. The more radical interpretation, and the one suggested, would be Jerusalem symbolizing the exiles in Babylonia. When the Judean elites return from Babylonia in the late sixth- to early fifth- centuries BCE, they encounter an ethnically and religiously pluralistic Yehud, Samaria, and Egypt (cf. Ezra 4:1-23; Neh 4:1-23). According to Knoppers,

In dealing with the political, social and cultic evidence from the Diaspora and the homeland in the 6th and 5th centuries BCE, one is confronted with a plurality of Judean communities within the larger context of the Neo-Babylonian and Achaemenid empires. Multiple Yahwisms, rather than a single Yahwism, characterised the social and religious landscape.⁷²

The pluralism of “the peoples of the land(s)” and their real or imagined ethnic and religious foreignness (Ezra 10:2, 11; Neh 10:28-31) will clash with the returnees’ ideologies of “extreme exclusivity” embodied and critiqued in the person of Jerusalem in the passage. The “peoples of the land” are identified with those seven peoples whom God commanded the Israelites to drive out (Ezra 9:1-2), of which two were the Hittite and Amorite parents of Jerusalem herself (Ezek 16:3, 45). The ideologies of “extreme exclusivity” will define “true Israel” as those belonging to the children of the *golah*, the returning exiles from Babylonia (Ezra 6.19-21; 8:35; 10.7, 16). These ideologies will be manifested in narrow injunctions against mixed marriages (Ezra 9; Neh 13:23-27). Non-*golah* Jewish women were lumped with ethnically foreign women as objectionable women for *golah* men to marry, because they contaminate the “holy seed” that will be sown into the “new” land (Ezra 9:2, 11-15).⁷³

Ezekiel 16:44-63 presents an alternative outlook. By asserting the foreign origins of Samaria and Egypt/Sodom, and by making them more righteous and favored than Jerusalem, who also shares their foreignness, the text has those who will regard themselves as the “true Israel” becoming the chastened Other. By recognizing and accepting the ethnic and religious plurality of other diasporic Judeans, the text forces Jerusalem (the *golah*) to acknowledge and

⁷² Knoppers, “Exile, Return and Diaspora,” 46.

⁷³ For a discussion of the politics and economics of *golah* endogamy, see Gale A. Yee, *Poor Banished Children of Eve: Woman as Evil in the Hebrew Bible* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress, 2003), 143–46.

accept her own guilt and sinfulness and be purified by God's very self. It accomplishes this through the shared foreign parentage of all these characters and their future inclusion in the same "everlasting covenant."⁷⁴

When YHWH establishes this covenant, "you (Jerusalem) will know that I am YHWH" (*weyada 'at ki- 'ani yhwah*, v. 62). The marriage metaphor of 16:8 might be recurring here in the renewal of God's covenant. The climax of God's covenantal re-betrothal of the wife/Israel in Hos 2:16-20 (MT 2:18-22) declares: "I will take you for my wife in faithfulness; and you shall know YHWH" (*weyada 'at 'et-yhwah*). However, the covenant God establishes with Jerusalem in Ezek 16:62-63 does not end on a happy note, like Hosea's. The knowledge of God that results from YHWH's covenant with Jerusalem intends that she remember (*zkr*) and be ashamed, never opening her mouth again because of her disgrace, "when I have purified her of all that she has done" (v. 63).⁷⁵

Conclusion

Ezekiel 16:44-63 marks the conclusion of a chapter filled with sexual violence against the personified city of Jerusalem (16:1-43). It veers from this theme by providing a reflection on the ethnically foreign parentage of Jerusalem as a product of a Hittite mother and Amorite father that was asserted in 16:3. The family metaphor is extended to provide Jerusalem with sisters and nieces: Sodom and Samaria and their "daughters," two vanquished cities with their dependent towns. Jerusalem is accused of following in their sinful ways, becoming even more corrupt than they. Only Sodom's sin is specified: her arrogance, gluttony, materialistic comfort and her disregard of the poor and needy in her midst. On the basis of other texts that associate Sodom with Egypt, I argued that Sodom becomes Ezekiel's avatar for the Judean communities settled in Egypt. These include not only those already established at Migdol, Tahpanhes, Memphis, and in the land of Pathros, but also the military community of Elephantine. Along with the exilic populations in Samaria and Judah, these ethnically and religiously mixed communities exhibit a different diasporic history than those deported in the three Babylonian exiles. Ezekiel 16:44-63 reveals that

⁷⁴ Thank you, Corrine L. Carvalho!

⁷⁵ While the NRSV refers to God "forgiving" Jerusalem, I follow Galambush, Block, and Odell in translating *kipper* as "purify" or "cleanse."

the post-582 social landscape extends beyond the usual binary of Babylonian exiles and peoples of the land (*golah/‘am ha-’aretz*). There are actually four groups: the *golah*, or Babylonian exiles represented by Jerusalem; the internally mixed non-*golah* groups in Yehud; the internally re-mixed groups in Samaria; and the various diaspora Jews in Egypt. In 16:44-63, other voices emerge that present alternate understandings of Jewishness during the exilic period and all of them are included in the “everlasting covenant.”

Little White Fox:
*A Queer and Indecenting Theology of a Shemale Escort in
Hong Kong¹*

Rose Wu

Introduction

The first time I encountered Leo was in Shenzhen in a small office of Midnight Blue, a non-profit organization committed to developing a mutual support network for male and transgender sex workers in Hong Kong and mainland China. It was an exposure visit in 2010, which I organized for the Chung Chi Divinity School students who took my course “Ethics, the Church, and Sexuality.” At that time, Leo was a program staff of Midnight Blue and presented himself as a male gay person. He was also a part-time student working on his master’s degree in cultural studies at Lingnan University. I noticed his body seemed to be a bit thin and small for a male. As a guest teacher, his presentation was inspiring and erotic.

¹ I am deeply honored and privileged to be invited as one of the contributors to this Festschrift for my dear sister, teacher and friend from Hong Kong, Prof. Kwok Pui-lan. She was also an exemplary person and inspiration that helped shape my theological path from studying at Chung Chi Divinity School of the Chinese University of Hong Kong in the mid-1980s to the Episcopal Divinity School (EDS) in the late 1990s. Through her writings and teachings in the early 1980s, my generation of female seminarians in Hong Kong were excited to learn about the new trend of the feminist theological movement in the West as well as in Asia. I also feel grateful for her recommendation of me to pursue a D.Min. degree at EDS. With the rich nourishment of the EDS community, I was empowered to move beyond the traditional theological assumptions and norms of gender and sexuality and to embrace the experiences of the queer and indecent aliens into my theological projects. As a student of Prof. Kwok, I want to lift up this article as one of the fruits harvested from Prof. Kwok’s garden that she planted many, many years ago in Hong Kong.

The second time I invited Leo as a guest speaker in my class was the spring of 2017. This time, Leo dressed like a beautiful lady and introduced herself/himself as “小白狐” (“Little White Fox” [hereafter “Fox”]). S/he had just published a Chinese book featuring 19 of her/his clients and their sexual desires, entitled *I Am a Shemale Escort* 《如果可以選擇，我願意出世便是...》.² S/he said in an interview in her book that s/he purposefully chose the offensive word “人妖” (“shemale”) in her title because s/he wanted to take ownership of the derogatory word that has been used to shame the transgender community. S/he also explained the significance of using “white fox” to identify herself/himself; the term is derived from a mainland love song that describes a fox spirit that goes through different lifetimes to save its lover. In addition, s/he thought that s/he herself /himself carries a fox spirit, which in Chinese culture refers to someone who is a beautiful and seductive mistress.³

My students and I were deeply grateful to have these brief, yet genuine, encounters with Fox, a transgender person. Her/His story not only opened up a totally new window for us to understand and explore the vast diversity of gender expressions and sexual desires of human beings, but it also challenged us to reflect on the narrow and ever-narrowing boundaries of traditional theological norms and assumptions of sex, gender, marriage, and human sexuality.

Christian theology starts with the body – the incarnated body of Christ. As feminist and queer theologians Lisa Isherwood and Marcella Althaus-Reid explain,

The Christian god/man does not have a fixed nature It is through changes from divine to flesh, flesh and blood to bread and wine, and from human to cosmic spirit, that the full incarnation of redemptive praxis takes place. . . . Queer theology⁴ does not operate in easy answers and tidy

² “Shemale” or “ladyboy” are common terms used throughout Asia to describe feminine-looking trans women, gay men, or non-binary/third-gender people with a penis. However, the Chinese words “人妖” refer to a person who is seen as a monster who subjugates evil spirits.

³ Arthur Tam, “Transgender prostitute Little White Fox on sex, heteronormativity and her debut book,” interview, *TimeOut*, May 30, 2016, <https://www.timeout.com/hong-kong/lgbt/transgender-prostitute-little-white-fox-on-her-debut-book-i-am-a-shemale-escort>.

⁴ The term *queer* can be understood within queer theory as encompassing one of three meanings: as an umbrella term, as transgressive action, and as erasing

doctrine: truly honoring our incarnation does not allow for such neat packaging and comfort. Incarnation and queer theory are splendid, passionate and risk-compelling companions—they promise nothing and they offer everything.⁵

Fox is a person who embodies Isherwood and Althaus-Reid's quote as a shemale escort who cannot easily be confined in a box constructed by the perceptions and norms of society and the Church, who is full of splendor and passion and whose life is defined by risk-taking, and who promises nothing to the world but offers everything.

Specifically, I will adopt in this article feminist/queer/indecent theologians' wisdom and theological methodology to do three things:

(1) Illustrate how a transgender/shemale escort's displaced, marginal, and transgressive position challenges the central authority of heterosexual and patriarchal assumptions of Christian doctrine on sex, gender, and human sexuality;

(2) Adopt queer/trans-theology and indecent theology to uncover the false authority of Christian sexual doctrines, which many mainstream Christian theologians consider as "decent" and proper for Christian women and queer folks, especially in sexual matters, and explore a sexual ethic which dares to take prophetic stands in the face of hypocrisy and violence and helps make our moral discernment more faithful to God and inclusive of all God's people; and

(3) Based on the transgressive story of Fox, reconstruct a Christology and spirituality from an indecent, subversive, and pleasurable experience of a shemale escort's liberation in order, as biblical scholar Ken Stones suggests, to reclaim our right to be

boundaries. Queer theology is a theological method that has developed out of the philosophical approach of queer theory that is built upon such scholars as Michel Foucault, Gayle Rubin, and Judith Butler. Queer theology begins with an assumption that gender non-conformity and gay and lesbian desire have always been present in human history, including the Bible. It is inclusive to individuals' sexual and gender identity and allows the LGBTQ community to reclaim their space in Christianity.

⁵ Lisa Isherwood and Marcella Althaus-Reid, eds., *The Sexual Theologian: Essays on Sex, God and Politics* (London: T&T Clark International, 2004), 8.

different and “abnormal/queer” and to be able to turn boundaries inside out through a presence on the margins.⁶

The Transgressive Journey and the Transformation of Little White Fox

Transgression in late Latin *transgressionem* (nominative *transgressio*) means “the violation of a law, a duty or moral principle.” In classical Latin, *transgredior* is an action that carries a person “to step across, to pass over, to go beyond borders.” According to cultural critic Jamake Highwater, “transgression” is closely associated with the religious idea of damnation and is generally understood as a violation of morality. In his book *Mythology of Transgression: Homosexuality as Metaphor*, Highwater’s argument rests on a redefinition of “transgression,” which society has traditionally rendered as sinful or inherently dangerous behavior. What we have missed, he claims, is the notion of “transgression” as a courageous testing of boundaries, a creative and rebellious act that breaks conceptual barriers.⁷ French Philosopher Michel Foucault also recognizes “transgression” as a resistance to normalizing practices of master narratives. He said in an interview, “To resist is not simply a negation but a creative process.”⁸ Along with Highwater’s and Foucault’s line of thought, queer theologian Robert E. Shore-Goss comprehends transgression primarily as “an act that brings about transformation” and is essential to the hermeneutical development of queer theologies and queer hybrid theologies.⁹

⁶ Lisa Isherwood and Marcella Althaus-Reid, “Introduction: Queering Theology, Thinking Theology and Queer Theory,” in *The Sexual Theologian: Essays on Sex, God and Politics*, eds. Lisa Isherwood and Marcella Althaus-Reid (London: T&T Clark International, 2004), 7–9.

⁷ Jamake Highwater, *The Mythology of Transgression: Homosexuality as Metaphor* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), 42.

⁸ Quoted in David M. Halperin, *Saint Foucault: Towards a Gay Hagiography* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995), 60.

⁹ Robert E. Shore-Goss, *Queering Christ: Beyond Jesus Acted Up* (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock Publishers, 2002), 229–30.

What kind of Social Environment Do Trans People Like Fox Have to Face in Hong Kong?

In his research paper, Robyn Emerton offers detailed explanations about the different understandings of transsexual and transgender people based on Hong Kong's context. First of all,

transgender is used as an umbrella term for all those persons who have a deep conviction that their biological sex, as designated at birth, is incompatible with their gender (their psychological or inner sense of being male or female), and who have an overwhelming desire permanently to live and function in the opposite gender to their biological sex. It includes transsexual persons, who intend to undergo surgical procedures to bring their physical self in alignment with their gender identity (usually referred to as "pre-operative transsexual persons"), and those who have already undergone such gender reassignment surgery ("post-operative transsexual persons"). It also encompasses those other transgender persons who, for whatever reason, be it health-related or otherwise, do not intend to undergo surgery (though they may be taking hormones), but who have nevertheless permanently adopted the opposite gender to their biological sex, or have an overwhelming desire to do so. Sometimes, a broader meaning of the term "transgender" is adopted in the literature, which also includes cross-dressers (colloquially referred to as "transvestites"). As cross-dressers do not desire to live permanently in the opposite gender to their biological sex.¹⁰

Currently, Hong Kong has no gender recognition laws, which unfortunately is common in many other countries around the world, as noted in this Human Rights Watch report in 2016 that also explains the problems and impediments to transgender people's rights that this stance creates:

A landmark report by the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights in 2011 on violence and discrimination based on sexual orientation and gender identity noted that most countries do not allow for legal gender recognition, so that transgender people may face many difficulties,

¹⁰ Robyn Emerton, "Neither Here nor There: The Current Status of Transsexual and Other Transgender Persons Under Hong Kong Law," *Hong Kong University Scholars Hub*, <https://hub.hku.hk/bitstream/10722/133105/2/content.pdf?accept=1>.

including applying for employment, housing, bank credit or state benefits, or when traveling abroad. The follow-up report, issued in 2015, identified progress in 10 countries, but found that the overall lack of progress continued to impact a wide spectrum of rights for transgender people.¹¹

The Human Rights Watch report also emphasizes that transgender people are not seeking any special rights:

The law should not force people to carry an identity marker that does not reflect who they are. Recognizing, in law, peoples' self-identified gender is not asking governments to acknowledge any new or special rights; instead, it is a commitment to the core idea that the state or other actors will not decide for people who they are.¹²

To make matters worse in Hong Kong, the government has required sexual reassignment surgery (SRS) for persons to change their gender marker on legal documents, such as one's Hong Kong identity card and passport, since 2018. SRS involves not only genital reconstruction but also sterilization. In contrast to most other countries, in order to satisfy the "full" SRS requirement, a transgender man in Hong Kong is not only required to remove the uterus and ovaries but is also required to construct an artificial penis, which might not be fully functional. As a counter voice, the Equal Opportunities Commission together with many LGBTIQ¹³ groups argued that there should be no requirement for a medical diagnosis for transgender people to be recognized. Rather, protocols should be in line with international developments, such as the World Health Organization's recognition that transgender people should be recognized as long as they had made a statutory declaration that he or she intends to live permanently in his or her affirmed gender.

A recent study in Hong Kong examined the various forms of violence faced by transgender people. It revealed that transgender people face harassment, humiliation, and violence on a daily basis. These degrading and discriminatory practices not only result in the

¹¹ Neela Ghoshal and Kyle Knight, "Rights in Transition: Making Legal Recognition for Transgender People a Global Priority," *Human Rights Watch World Report 2016*, <https://www.hrw.org/world-report/2016/country-chapters/africa-americas-asia-europe/central-asia-middle-east/north-0#>.

¹² Ghoshal and Knight, "Rights in Transition."

¹³ LGBTIQ is an acronym that stands for lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender/transsexual, intersex, and queer.

exclusion of transgender people from opportunities available to their fellow citizens, but it also deeply affects their well-being and may cause self-harm behaviors.¹⁴

As a Sex Worker, How Is Fox Exposed to Legal Risks in Hong Kong?

In Hong Kong, commercial sexual services (prostitution) between two adults are not illegal. Therefore, it is not illegal for Hong Kong residents to work individually in an apartment to provide sexual services. However in reality, sex workers are often charged by the police and thus affected by different laws surrounding the sex industry. For instance, landlords of sex workers are warned of the possibility of being charged and are required by the police to terminate rental contracts of sex workers, forcing sex workers to move out. Moreover, sex workers are not allowed to hire a bodyguard or caretaker. They are therefore forced to work alone in an isolated and dangerous environment, exposed to risks of violence, including harassment, physical assaults, robberies, rapes, and murders. According to a research report by Amnesty International Hong Kong, one major threat for Hong Kong's sex workers is the police force's misuse of laws and powers to set up, punish, and abuse sex workers, such as through entrapment. Undercover officers are allowed to receive masturbation services, and some officers even demand sex as the price of not arresting sex workers. The report also shows cases of discrimination by the police and correctional services staff when the sex worker is transgender.¹⁵

How Does Fox Define Her/His Gender/Sexual identity?

By defining herself/himself as a "shemale," Fox experiences her/his gender identity and gender expression as falling outside, or somewhere between, the categories of a man and a woman. Some years ago, Fox decided to have transfeminine top surgery outside of Hong Kong and refused to take hormones because s/he is afraid that they will kill her/his libido and shrink her/his penis. S/he has no legal protection though and is exposed to various dangers; when

¹⁴ The full report of *Study on Violence against Transgender People in Hong Kong* can be found online at https://tgr.org.hk/attachments/article/272/20190129_TGR_TG_Violence_report_online.pdf.

¹⁵ Amnesty International, *China: Harmfully Isolated: Criminalizing Sex Work in Hong Kong*, May 26, 2016, <https://www.amnesty.org/en/documents/asa17/4032/2016/en/>.

trans sex workers are arrested, they are often sent to the city's maximum security psychiatric prison. As prisoners are assigned to a unit based on the sex listed on their identity document, Fox would be put in a male ward where s/he would potentially be exposed to sexual abuse by the other prisoners in that ward. It is a risk one takes if s/he still believes it is worth the chance to live authentically and happily as who s/he is.

"Before I became a 'shemale escort,' I thought I was just gay and that man-on-man sex was the greatest thing in the world," said Fox, sharing her/his journey of transgression in an interview. "I think ideas of commitment and marriage actually hinder sexual expression and desire. It's not something that requires undying devotion, but pop culture tries to make us think otherwise. That's not to say that there is anything wrong with committed relationships. I just don't think the idea should be forced upon people. When I see LGBTIQ people trying to fit into the heteronormative structure, I actually think the community is [in] regression."¹⁶

For Fox, being transgender makes her/him feel wonderful: "It gives transgender people the ability to transcend convention." S/he told the interviewer, "Many of my clients love eating cum [semen]. But these clients actually hate cock [penis] and find the idea of sleeping with a man disgusting. However, they really want to swallow a transperson's cum. It is a desire that only transpeople can fulfill. . . . They love to be fucked by a lady boy – [i]t's their dream."¹⁷ With this understanding, I would describe Fox as a non-binary or genderqueer person.¹⁸

¹⁶ Tam, "Transgender prostitute Little White Fox."

¹⁷ Justin Heifetz, "Hong Kong's Complicated, Bustling 'Lady Boy' Sex Industry," *Vice*, July 1, 2016, https://www.vice.com/en_us/article/785_gdb/hong-kongs-complicated-bustling-lady-boy-sex-industry.

¹⁸ According to Wikipedia, the term "genderqueer" originated in queer zines of the 1980s and is a precursor to the term "non-binary." In addition to being an umbrella term, "genderqueer" has been used as an adjective to refer to any person who transgresses distinctions of gender, regardless of their self-defined gender identity or "queer" gender. Individuals may express gender non-normatively by not conforming into the binary gender categories of "male" and "female." "Genderqueer" has also been applied by people who challenge binary social constructions of gender.

How Does Fox Describe Her/His Transgressive Journey from an Ordinary School "Boy" to a Gay person and Then to a Shemale Sex Worker?

Fox told me that, although s/he was a "boy" by birth whose sexual orientation was supposed to be attracted to "girls" under the heterosexual gender norm, s/he realized that her/his sexual preference has always been towards males since s/he was five or six years old. However, s/he had kept this secret silently until s/he fell in love with a male classmate when s/he was a senior in high school. S/he tried to approach him but was deeply hurt after s/he was rejected. Taking Chinese literature and cultural studies as his major subjects in universities helped Fox to gain more knowledge about the queer nature of human sexualities in Chinese as well as other cultural and historical contexts. However, the major inspiration and motivation for her/him to transgress the heterosexual gender norm to affirm her/his sexual preference towards males was her/his involvement in labor and social movements and his exposure to LGBTIQ communities since the mid-1990s.

In terms of homosexual and transsexual culture, many people think that Chinese society is more repressive than Western society. However, when Fox made a thorough study of ancient Chinese literature, s/he discovered that this is a misconception. According to the most representational study by Xiaomingxiong, *The History of Homosexuality in China*,¹⁹ homo-bi and transsexual practices were very common phenomena in China. First of all, many Chinese emperors were fond of male companionship and openly practiced pederasty. Moreover, many classical Chinese novels, operas, songs, and poems were full of male-male, female-female romances and trans-prostitutes, like the stories in *Hong Liu Meng* (The Dream of the Red Chamber) and the first gay novel, *Pin Hua Pao Jing* (Precious Mirror for Gazing at Flowers), in the Qing Dynasty, as well as *Long Yang Yi Shi* and *Yi Chun Xiang Zhi* in the Ming Dynasty. One significant feature of Chinese transvestites in earlier times was that most of them were male actors portraying actresses in Chinese operas. They were adored only when they acted as a feminine character. In real life, they were marginalized, like male prostitutes. However, homosexuality was tolerated and accepted only when it was not threatening to the basic heterosexual family structure.²⁰

¹⁹ Xiaomingxiong, *The History of Homosexuality in China* (Hong Kong: Siuming and Rosa Winkel Press, 1997), 4–21.

²⁰ Xiaomingxiong, *The History of Homosexuality*, 323–25. According Chinese

Thus, in Chinese history, oppression toward sexual minorities was not based on their sexual behavior as non-heterosexuals, as in Western traditions. Rather, discrimination was based on the gender and class hierarchy of society. Compared with the explicit homophobic culture of the West, Xiaomingxiong described Chinese homophobic culture as an implicit homophobia.²¹

Fox explained that if you want to live an authentic and happy life you must dare to take risks. S/he admitted that it was potentially a risk and danger for her/his health and body when s/he decided to have transfeminine top surgery in mainland China. “Why did you want to take this risk so desperately?” I asked. “Because I know from my gut feeling that I was born to be a shemale – to have breasts and a penis,” s/he said. “It is the best way I can enjoy sex with ‘men’ to the fullest, both bodily and spiritually. As you know, my sexual attraction has always been towards males. This is, indeed, a true self transformation for me.” In our conversation, Fox made a point that, compared with the sex culture in China, Hong Kong is more conservative because of the influence of Christianity. S/he was quite confident that s/he won’t stop being a sex worker because through serving her/his clients, s/he has better realized her/his own sexual needs and has learned that so many people are hiding their pain under the censorship of the existing gender/sexual norms. S/he believes her/his service have helped to liberate many of her/his clients from this suppression. Fox described in her/his interview an experience s/he had while working: “One client wanted me to wear canvas shoes and pretend that I’m molesting him while he’s fully dressed in women’s clothing and jerking off.”²²

From reading Fox’s published book, *I Am a Shemale Escort*, and her/his second upcoming book, I was deeply touched and amazed by many stories that s/he shared, especially those that would most likely be labeled as “perverted lust” in our society. Among her/his clients, many seem to be “normal” and “decent” people on the surface, such as students, husbands, fathers, gym trainers, business

tradition, only males were allowed to be trained as opera actors and actresses. Therefore, many men joined the opera school to be trained and later to act as actresses. Very often they were expected to play their female roles even off stage. Many of these male actresses also provided sexual services to the male elites of society.

²¹ Xiaomingxiong, *The History of Homosexuality*, 4–21.

²² Tam, “Transgender prostitute Little White Fox.”

and professional people, etc. But deep inside of them, their souls are dry and lonely because they all thirst for some kind of sexual liberation. On the other hand, Fox also entertained many “abnormal” clients, such as homosexuals, bi- and transsexuals, and people with sexual addictions, disabilities, and diseases deemed disgusting, such as sadomasochism, cancer, psoriasis, etc. Fox criticized our society; in the name of “sexual norms,” s/he said that society’s judging of these people as “deviant” and “immoral” is, in fact, immoral. Through social stigmatization and exclusion, these people have internalized shame so deep that it paralyzes their bodies, shrinks their minds, and constricts their hearts. Fox has great admiration for her/his clients for their courage to come out and seek true liberation of who they are.²³ Through her/his “performance” and service, Fox not only relieves her/his clients to enjoy sex, but s/he also empowers them to regain their pride and dignity as full human beings.²⁴ To me, what s/he sells is more than sex; her/his interactions include listening, understanding, touching, accepting, affirming, healing, and respecting those who are regarded as the “different others.”

Uncovering the False Authority of Christian Sexual Doctrines and the Challenge of Queer Theology on Gay-Lesbianism and Feminist Liberation Theologies

In order to seek true liberation as a shemale escort—a transgender person and a sex worker—Fox has had to confront and subvert the double marginalization and oppression of the dualistic norm of male/female genderism and the virgin/whore dichotomy.²⁵

²³ 小白狐：《如果可以選擇，我願意出世便是……》香港：今日出版公司 [Little White Fox: I Am a Shemale] (Hong Kong: Today Publications, 2016).

²⁴ I use the word *performance* here to describe Fox’s sex work for two reasons. The first reason is to echo queer theorist Judith Butler’s proposed theory that “gender” is best perceived as “performative.” According to Butler, gender is essentially a performative repetition of acts associated with males or females. The “script” of gender performance is effortlessly transmitted from generation to generation in the form of socially established “meanings.” The second reason is because, from my observation, Fox’s sex work service is like an art of body/gender performance, such as “queer parody” which carries a trans-spirit of changing and transforming from time to time.

²⁵ Throughout the history of Western culture, recurring binaries of women have been used to present a simplistic ideology of femininity and to reinforce gendered power structures. These depictions are often linked to religion, aiming to categorize women into “good” vs. “bad” girls or “sinners” vs. “saints” with the labels being

In this section, I will draw upon queer and indecent theologians' wisdom to uncover the false authority of Christian sexual doctrines and to examine their critiques of gay-lesbianism and feminist liberation theologies based on the resurrected voice of the alienated bodies of trans and queer people.

How Do Trans People Experience "God"?

While the experience of each trans person to "god" is unique, Krzysztof Bujnowski— similar to Fox's childhood experience described earlier—uses walking "through the wilderness" to describe his quiet suffering as a transperson living in this world:

I held the shame within me, allowing it to keep on wracking and wrecking mind and body. The truth that could not be told is that I am a man born into a woman's body. . . . For those of us whose gender does not conform to the body we inhabit, every social encounter is a potential danger.²⁶

As he grew from a child to a young person to an adult, he saw doors were closing because so many things depend on gender as a passport for inclusion. It was clear to him that he was a sinner. He asked, Where was God in all this? He argued to himself that this is only the Church's thinking. He could not believe that the Christ who empathized with sinners and prostitutes would deny him. He spent several years looking for God. On the contrary, he came to believe in nothing but the possibilities of humanity. He thinks the closest he comes to a spiritual essence is when his body feels fully engaged with his mind. "The Church could have my body but not my soul," he wrote.²⁷ From these sharings by Fox and Bujnowski, it is evident that the "god" that the Church has preached and presented is too small and exclusive.

The Christian tradition that views non-hetero sex and non-marital sex as sinful acts rests on a view of sexuality as legitimate only within a monogamous marriage between a man and a woman.

determined by a woman's sexual behavior. While the "good girl" abstains from sex and is "chaste" (virgin girl), the "bad girl" is sexually active (whores, porn girls). Within Christianity, Eve usually represents the original "bad girl," implying that female sexuality is both dangerous and untrustworthy.

²⁶ Krzysztof Bujnowski, "Through the Wilderness," in *Transformations*, eds. Lisa Isherwood and Marcella Althaus-Reid (London: SCM Press, 2009), 60.

²⁷ Bujnowski, "Through the Wilderness," 66.

Anything else is an abnormality and against nature. Another point of Christian condemnation made against non-hetero sex is that it fails to foster human completion through gender complementarity. However, feminist theologian Kathy Rudy provides a lucid observation that today's predominant system of gendered theology of males and females unites only in terms of the heterosexual family. The entity that grounds the whole church system not only entraps ourselves in patriarchalism, but we also exclude from the Church those who do not fit the paradigm of gender complementarity.²⁸ Under these circumstances, trans people like Bujnowski and Fox, in order to avoid condemnation, probably want to either hide their true identity in the closet or leave the Church. I support Rudy's analysis that these gender stereotypes are not natural, fixed, and innate; rather, they are socially constructed, asymmetrical, and reflect the dominance/submission, public/private splits of the patriarchal and heterosexist social and religious order.

Does Queer Theology Then Shed Light on the Liberation and Transformation of Trans People?

Recently, the debate about sexual ethics has been challenged and altered by the introduction of queer theory. This development is a significant shift from the dualistic dichotomy of the homosexual/heterosexual paradigm, for queer theory demystifies the idea of stable sexes, genders, and sexual identities and claims all persons to possess the capacity for a flexible sexuality. This articulation not only challenges traditional concept of sex and gender, but it even raises questions about any dualistic and static definition of sexual identities. The first two queer theologians' wisdom I bring to my discussion are Shore-Goss's and Isherwood's critiques of heteronormative orthodoxy and hetero/homo sexual preferences and their pursuit of alternative theologies which are inclusive, transformational, and rooted in queerness. According to Shore-Goss,

"Heteronormativity . . . became a term to describe the dominant sex/gender system that privileges heterosexual males while it subordinates women and disprivileges gender/sexual transgressors. . . . This heteronormative

²⁸ Kathy Rudy, *Sex and the Church: Gender, Homosexuality and the Transformation of Christian Ethics* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1997), 38–39.

understanding creates a gender/sexual fundamentalism that pathologizes gender and sexual differences and fails to accept the fluidity of gender and sexual identity.”²⁹

Adopting similar reading strategies of feminists and African Americans, Shore-Goss observes that since the 1970s, the first breakthrough that LGBTIQ Christian communities have achieved was to adopt three textual strategies to reread the Bible: (1) deflecting textual violence, (2) outing the text, and (3) befriending texts.³⁰ Although he affirms that queering Bible strategies not only transgress heterosexist boundaries but also the sexual orthodoxies of gays and lesbians to include bisexual and transgendered contributors, he also admits that many gay and lesbian theologians have fallen into a trap that makes hetero/homo sexual preferences the exclusive metacategories of sexual identity. He adopts the critique of Steven Seidman and points out that the dominant ethnic model of gay identity is a reflection of a narrow, white, middle-class, Eurocentric experience. Neither bisexual men nor female-to-male transsexuals nor the intersex fit neatly into this gay template.³¹

In the introduction of his newest co-edited book with Joseph N. Goh, *Unlocking Orthodoxies for Inclusive Theologies: Queer Alternatives*, Shore-Goss first stresses that,

queer theology is not singular but pluralistic. . . . It points to the divine excess beyond particular queer theologies that remain partial and evolutionary in their inclusions and representations of divine incarnations. Secondly, queer theologies are hybrid, postcolonial, intersectional, ecological, political, and inclusive of mixed identities and multiple religious participants. . . . At the heart of queer theologies is the creative tension between divine apophysis and incarnational liminality that incited “divine undoing” and excites queer passions and desires in what Catherine Keller describes as “intercarnations, naked resistance, life

²⁹ Shore-Goss, *Queering Christ*, 224.

³⁰ Shore-Goss, *Queering Christ*, 205. Based on Shore-Goss’s analysis, the first strategy has a characteristic of “negative” apologetics which has lasted for more than thirty years. The second and third reading strategies are more positive apologetics in nature, promoting queer reading strategies from the text and discovering queer subjectivity within the text.

³¹ Shore-Goss, *Queering Christ*, 225.

beyond the bounds, the entangled flesh of a new assemblage.”³²

Lastly, he explains that queer theology, as a transformative praxis, inserts a strategy of radical inclusion that disrupts exclusive theologies and elides dualistic boundaries. To summarize Shore-Goss’s insights about queer theology, I share the following quote because it rightly expresses the challenge and inspiration I felt after a true encounter with a shemale person – Fox:

Queer has widened my self-definitions by navigating me into uncharted water where I engage in conversations with people whose identities are shaped by particular markers and personal experiences quite different from my own. These experiences are challenging, engaging, and ever-widening. . . . Queering is ultimately opening space to new immigrant identities to articulate their own perspective, quite radical and even challenging to my own.³³

As for Isherwood, she accurately points out that feminists are right to “denounce the sacralization of oppressive gender patterns, but they [are not aware] that it is a ‘heterosexual matrix’ which gives coherence and stability to the myth of heterosexuality as a natural or a given, while genders are useful in so far as they ‘play’ masculine and feminine oppositions. What happened here is that queer theory has introduced the concept of sexuality as learned and is more unstable than previously assumed.”³⁴ The question for her is, How do we “learn” and “unlearn” theology and sexuality?

Among contemporary queer theologians, Isherwood is one of the few who has devoted more time and energy to engage in serious theological research and writings based on transsexual and transgender people’s lived experience. *Controversies in Contextual Theology: Transformation*, co-edited by Althaus-Reid and herself in 2009, is a passionate and groundbreaking book that dares to take a clear option for transsexual and transgender people like Fox, the alienated bodies who do not fit within the traditional binary concept of gender and who have been stigmatized and silenced by mainstream society and religious institutions. As a feminist

³² Robert E. Shore-Goss and Joseph N. Goh, eds., *Unlocking Orthodoxies for Inclusive Theologies: Queer Alternatives* (London: Routledge, 2020), 11.

³³ Shore-Goss, *Queering Christ*, 233–34.

³⁴ Isherwood and Althaus-Reid, “Introduction: Queering Theology,” 5.

theologian, Isherwood finds her theology rooted in the tradition of liberation theology. The first emphasis that Isherwood makes in her dispute with other theologians involves the Christian doctrine of the Incarnation. In the introduction of *Controversies in Contextual Theology*, Isherwood argues that the claim that Christianity is a destabilizing religion rests on the Christian theology of incarnation—the declaration that an all-powerful creator of the universe left the heavens and became a baby, not a child with superhuman powers, but rather a very vulnerable child born to people under political oppression.³⁵ She offers a critical observation that Christian theology and tradition cling to power and hold fast to very rigid ideas about the nature of the world, sexuality, sin, and human nature and fail to see the radical implications that they declare. She points out that “God is in flesh changes everything, yet it has been a message of salvation in the hands of the Church which by its nature is afraid of change.”³⁶ In contrast to the traditional teachings of the orthodox theology of sexual ethics, the second emphasis that Isherwood suggests is that queer theology focuses on theological closets that prohibit what one can say or what is hidden in the Church. She especially stresses that “it is an incarnated body of theology which deals with desire, but also pleasure. And pleasure is, after all, the incarnation of desires [including sexual desires].”³⁷

While Isherwood feels passionate about advocating for the legitimacy of queer voices, she is also aware of other feminists’ and liberation theologians’ criticism of queer theology or theory. Sheila Jeffrey is in the forefront of those who raise such criticism. One of Jeffrey’s major concerns arises from the feminist understanding that gender is based on power relations, and she questions how this perception is to be overcome if basic gender construction is simply performed and not challenged. She also questions that butch-femme and even transsexual surgery appropriates heterosexual binarism in order to assume sexual realism—to look to the historical oppressor for legitimacy. As for liberation theologians, their main worry is that queer politics has no interest in analyzing capitalism, viewing the main issue as one of access and not the system itself.³⁸ As I try to use

³⁵ Lisa Isherwood, “Introduction,” in *Transformations*, eds. Lisa Isherwood and Marcella Althaus-Reid (London: SCM Press, 2009), 1–2.

³⁶ Isherwood and Althaus-Reid, *The Sexual Theologian*, 7.

³⁷ Isherwood and Althaus-Reid, *The Sexual Theologian*, 6.

³⁸ Isherwood and Althaus-Reid, *The Sexual Theologian*, 7–11.

queer theology to make sense of Fox's sexual liberation as a shemale escort, I share the same concerns of the above feminist and liberation theologians and find their questions and criticisms challenging.

The last theologian's wisdom that will shed light on the current debates of feminist and liberation theologies on one hand, and queer theology on the other, is Althaus-Reid's indecent theology. Althaus-Reid, born in Argentina and baptized as a Roman Catholic, became the first woman appointed to a chair in the School of Divinity at the University of Edinburgh in Scotland in 2006. She was holding this post when she died at age 56. Her first book, *Indecent Theology*, was published in 2000 and was seen as one of the most provoking and disturbing theological works among the academic as well as ecumenical circles of the Christian community. The book challenges the sexual oppression behind traditional Christian concepts of decency and introduces a theology rooted in the context of people whose sexual freedoms have been deprived. In 2003, she wrote *The Queer God* that aims to liberate God from the closet of sex-negative Christian thought and to instead embrace God's role in the lives of LGBTIQ people.

I find Althaus-Reid's indecent theology especially illuminating as I reflect on the transgressive journey of Fox—a shemale escort. Writing from the context and location of a Latina and bisexual theologian, Althaus-Reid first raises her suspicion about the traditional concepts of *decencia/indecencia* (decency/indecency) that has different implications for men and women. Decency for men means honesty and trustworthiness. But for women, it implies a complex set of regulations of one's sexuality, including codes of dress, mobility, and hairstyle. Somehow poor women are more likely to be considered indecent than wealthy ones, and if they are indigenous or Black women, this background adds an extra category of indecency. Decency and indecency are therefore gender/sexual/racial/economic categories of defining "normality" in people's lives and in society, and they underline a multitude of oppressions. To begin her indecent move towards articulating a theology, Althaus-Reid takes as her subject the lemon vendors of Buenos Aires, poor women who refuse to wear underwear and are thus deemed "indecent." This indecency is an indicator of their marginalized socio-political location as well as their location within the hierarchical system of Christian theology. Her goal is to "undress" and destabilize the decent order that is a constructed political, social,

and sexual order which has been ideologically sacralized.³⁹ It was especially fascinating to read about Althaus-Reid's criticism of some feminists' interpretation of the "decency" of classical Mariology that actually reinforces an interlocked logical and political hegemony. Against these forms of "decent" Mariology, she uses the sexually fluid and indecent visions of Mary, which can be found among the "poor urban women" of Buenos Aires. By "indecencying" the image of the Virgin Mary, it not only serves to confront the limiting narrative of decent sexuality, but it offers an alternative path for a new methodology of "per/version," which enables the deconstruction of the central theological concepts of sexual morality.⁴⁰

For Althaus-Reid, "theology is a sexual art, but a Queer one . . . it uses an epistemology derived from circles of poverty and sexual exclusion to interrogate theology from a different perspective of love and a different understanding of Christian salvation."⁴¹ It is only for the body of aliens in the history of theology that hermeneutical avenues bring us new promises to old theological practices. She writes, "From Leather groups or the community organization of poor transvestites in Buenos Aires come many lessons to teach us about the beauty of our economic and affective alliances of the excluded in the world."⁴² Trans people, in their subjectivation that swings through disciplines over their bodies and pleasures, emerge affirming their bold truths in face of the determinations of sex, gender, and desires.

As a feminist theologian, I have to admit that the generalized heterosexism in feminist theories have blinded us and made us unable to listen to voices oppressed by another kind of exclusion—that of divergent sexualities and bodies. I agree with Althaus-Reid that "the gap between a feminist liberation theology and an indecent theology is one of sexual honesty."⁴³ She also believes that as feminist theologians are willing to break the wall of heterogenderism, they will encounter the strangers and queers who

³⁹ Isherwood and Althaus-Reid, *The Sexual Theologian*, 99.

⁴⁰ Marcella Althaus-Reid, *Indecent Theology: Theological Perversions in Sex, Gender and Politics* (New York: Routledge, 2000), 71-77.

⁴¹ Marcella Althaus-Reid, *From Feminist Theology to Indecent Theology* (London: SCM Press, 2004), 144.

⁴² Isherwood and Althaus-Reid, *The Sexual Theologian*, 108.

⁴³ Althaus-Reid, *Indecent Theology*, 7.

are at the margins and will find the stranger-God who came among them.

Reconstructing a Christology and Spirituality from an Indecent, Subversive, and Pleasurable Experience of a Shemale Escort's Liberation

Womanist theologian Kelly Brown Douglas rightly points out that dualistic philosophies that have governed the tradition of the Church in terms of sexuality have also been intrinsically misogynistic and have reflected a "patriarchal dualism."⁴⁴ In this dualism, the spirit is opposed to the body, with the spirit assumed to be higher and superior and the body lower and inferior. The companion of this dualism has been sexism or patriarchy. One implication that arises from this dualistic logic is the notion of divine impassivity – the apathy of God which James Nelson highlights in his article: "If the body is marked by passion and if spirit is passionless, then bodily hunger (eros) has no connection with the divine."⁴⁵ The apathetic image of God not only causes the negation of sex within the Church, but it also creates a false conception of Christian spirituality that is anti-body, anti-earth, and has an otherworldly focus. To me, this apathetic God stands in stark contrast to our experience of the incarnate body of Jesus Christ, who through his life demonstrated to us that God and humanity, the Creator and the created, the infinite and the finite, are experienced and manifested as one totality of life.

As I described in the first section, I was deeply touched by reading how Fox expresses her/his genuine respect and sacrificial love for the clients whom s/he has encountered. Through genuine and mutual respect, Fox was willing to use drag clothing and makeup to imitate and perform different female gender signifiers according to the client's requests, such as a Catholic nun, a schoolgirl in a school uniform, a policewoman, an air hostess with black pantyhose, etc. Moreover, s/he was able to negotiate and seek mutual consensus with the clients, including the price and the style of her/his service. Through sacrificial love, Fox was enthusiastic to

⁴⁴ Kelly Brown Douglas, *Sexuality and the Black Church: A Womanist Perspective* (New York: Orbis Books, 1999), 27.

⁴⁵ James B. Nelson, "Reuniting Sexuality and Spirituality," in *Christian Perspectives on Sexuality and Gender*, eds. Elizabeth Stuart and Adrian Thatcher (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1996), 215.

listen and respond to her/his clients' sexual yearnings that have been hidden in the closet and appear to be weird, disgusting, and even dangerous. One story impressed me very much. The client was a man who has a serious psoriasis disease. Fox was quite shocked when s/he first saw his entire body covered with red, flaky, and peeling skin. In fact, the client was not confident whether Fox would accept his request because of his low self-esteem. To his immense surprise, Fox agreed to offer him a service. Through her/his gentle and erotic touch, at that very moment, the client not only had an orgasm but was also able to regain his dignity and liberation as a full human being.

From queer theology's point of view, instead of adopting the traditional Church's sexual norm to condemn the experiences of Fox, a shemale prostitute, as immoral and sinful, I would rather affirm that those were empowering and spiritual encounters between Fox and her/his clients. I find that the following excerpted poem is a strong voice to affirm Fox's spiritual quest through sexual liberation:

I am proud to be called 'whore.'
When I became a whore, I declared my religious convictions.
When I became a whore, I declared my creativity to be as worthy as motherhood.
When I became a whore, I transformed tragedy into strength, loss into freedom.
...
Having become a whore, I have become a teacher of spiritual and psychological transformation.⁴⁶

However, one major question that we cannot avoid to ask is, are there any biblical resources related to sex workers that give us a liberating message? In drawing upon resources from the New Testament, a wide variety of women are part of the life of Jesus and the early Christian communities. Among them, Mary Magdalene is an important character (Luke 7:36-50, Mark 14:3-9, Matt 26:6-13).

Taking on Althaus-Reid's indecent theological perspective, Martin Hugo Cordova Quero gives a thorough examination on the three portrayals of Mary Magdalene in Christian traditions: (1) from

⁴⁶ Cosi Fabian, "The Holy Whore: A Woman's Gateway to Power," in *Whores and Other Feminists*, ed. Jill Nagle (London: Routledge, 1997), 44.

a prostitute and a repentant sinner to a saint in the classical Christian tradition; (2) from a sinful woman to a virtuous leader in heterodox writings; and (3) from indecent to decent in feminist writings. I find his criticism on the feminist depiction of Mary Magdalene especially helpful:

What feminist theologians clearly avoid is the sexuality aspect of Mary. . . . While [emphasizing] her as apostle, leader, prophet or pastor, they end up denying her sexuality by imposing onto her those categories traditionally understood as characteristic of male offices. In other words, in making her perfectly suitable to male structures, she becomes an icon for all women and men to fit suitably into hetero-patriarchal understandings of performances, whether these might be ecclesiastical ministry or gender and sexuality.⁴⁷

In his conclusion, Cordova Quero advocates that, in order to transform the world and make Mary's witness become guidance for freedom for those in Argentinean society who are outcasts and excluded because of their gender or performances of sexuality, Latin American liberation theology should move towards a recovery of a truly incarnational theology – to liberate Mary from the prison of oppressive hetero-patriarchal readings. In light of Cordova Quero's recommendation, I am convinced that theology based on the liberation of sex workers must be rooted in praxis-based methods that allow sex workers to reclaim, redefine, rename, and recreate their sacredness and wholeness, which is the gift of God to everyone.

Another theological insight which Althaus-Reid has mentioned in *Indecent Theology* is her model of the Bi/Christ. "In order to seek liberation for those who are outside the gates of the churches and the boundaries of heterosexuality, we need a larger Christ," she asserts.⁴⁸ Instead of imagining Jesus as a heterosexually oriented (celibate) man, she speaks about the bisexuality of Christ that offers an inclusive understanding of the incarnation. Her critique not only disrupts the exclusive heterosexual/binary identity template, but it also allows other obscene and queer representations of Christ to be included.

⁴⁷ Martin Hugo Cordova Quero, "The Prostitutes Also Go Into the Kingdom of God: A Queer Reading of Mary of Magdala," in *Liberation Theology and Sexuality*, ed. Marcella Althaus-Reid (Hampshire: Ashgate Publishing, 2006), 92-93.

⁴⁸ Althaus-Reid, *Indecent Theology*, 117.

Although he concurs that the Bi/Christ model addresses sexual attraction, Goss is concerned that this model does not fully embrace gender constructions that leave out gender conformists and gender transgressors. He supports Eleanor McLaughlin's notion of the transvestite Jesus:

The transvestite Jesus makes a human space where no one is out of place because the notions of place and gender have been transformed. Yes, human, yes, God, yes, woman, yes man, yes black, yes yellow, yes friend, yes stranger . . . yes, yes, yes, yes.⁴⁹

Based on the spiritual transformation of Fox's transgression, I agree with Goss that the Ultra/Christ includes not only the Bi/Christ to express sexual fluidity but also the Transvestite/Christ to express gender fluidity, and that this representation is more faithful to the metaphor of God who is ever-changing, shifting, and diverse, and honors the multiple transgender realities that human beings embody.⁵⁰

Conclusion

To conclude, I highlight three theological insights I observe from the story of Fox's transgression and transformation:

(1) Fox's strong desire to seek sex fulfillment through undergoing transfeminine top surgery and entering sex work echoes Carter Heyward's affirmation of our erotic power as God's scared power of transcendence. She describes the erotic as being our most fully embodied experience of the love of God because the divine presence is incarnate—embodied—in our relational selves. The eros is the sensual embodiment of the divine. We can know God only through the opening of our bodies and reaching out to each other in mutual empowering relationships.⁵¹

(2) As many queer theologians point out, "god" as a controlling power becomes the cancerous seed for the growth of sexism and heterosexism in the Church and society. Thus, "queer" is a self-conscious embrace of all that is transgressive of societal and religious norms, particularly in the context of sexuality and gender identity.

⁴⁹ Shore-Goss, *Queering Christ*, 181.

⁵⁰ Shore-Goss, *Queering Christ*, 182.

⁵¹ Carter Heyward, *Touching Our Strength: The Erotic as Power and the Love of God* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1989), 24, 99.

For Shore-Goss, the term “queer” is used to describe an action that “turns upside down, inside out” that which is seen as normative, including “heteronormative theologies.”⁵² Moreover, queer theology draws upon the insights of queer theorists and rejects the view of essentialism that sexuality is static and eternal, for erotic desire does not exist above or beyond history or culture, but is always bound up with issues of power – of those who categorize and label and of those who are labeled. Thus, the recognition of difference as a foundation for solidarity is central to queer theology.⁵³

(3) Based on Fox’s story, I agree with Isherwood and Althaus-Reid that “queer theology is a form of autobiography because it implies an engagement and a disclosure of experiences which traditionally have been silenced in theology. As a subversive force, queer theology focuses on theological closets in what has not been said or has been hidden. [In addition,] queer theology demands a passion for the marginalized. That passion is compassion but also a commitment to social justice because there is a wider understanding of human relationships involved. Thus, queer theology is an agent for transformation.”⁵⁴

My encounters with Fox compel me to experience Christ in a different image as one who is odd, indecent, and deviant. It also reminds me about the fundamental meaning of God’s Incarnation. Through this neighbor – Fox – I meet the Queer Christ that turned my theology and my life upside down; I am transformed. To imagine Jesus as a shemale like the eunuch in Matt 19:12, who is rejected by society, ritually unclean, and excluded from mainstream religious institution and society, is a powerful message of God’s radical love and inclusion. However, I doubt if the Church is willing to accept this image of Christ because this Queer Christ shakes the foundation of our patriarchal and heterosexist belief of the incarnate “god.”

⁵² Shore-Goss, *Queering Christ*, 228–29.

⁵³ Elizabeth Stuart et al., *Religion Is a Queer Thing: A Guide to the Christian Faith for Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgendered People* (Cleveland: Pilgrim Press, 1997), 3.

⁵⁴ Isherwood and Althaus-Reid, “Introduction: Queering Theology,” 6.

Occupying the Imagination: T. S. Eliot's (s) Creed against Church Union in Postcolonial Perspective

Mrinalini Sebastian and J. Jayakiran Sebastian

*What we call the beginning is often the end
And to make an end is to make a beginning.
The end is where we start from.
T. S. Eliot, "Little Gidding"*

I do not claim to state anything like the whole truth, but I do claim to come nearer to it than Mr. Eliot in saying that English Churchmen do agree to disagree about these matters of great weight [matters related to divergences within the proposed United Church of South India] which are here in question. And we do so because the majority of instructed Churchmen are aware of the profoundly complex character of religious truth; because we distrust the multiplication of dogmatic assertions which some would like to thrust upon us; because we have found that when men attempt to use human language for the clear cut definition of divine truths they commonly end by magnifying their real differences . . .

A. T. P. Williams, Church Union in South India: A Reply to Mr. T. S. Eliot's 'Reunion by Destruction' (1944)

Introduction and Personal Notes

This essay revisits a pamphlet written by the poet and culture critic, T. S. Eliot, during the build-up to the formation of the Church of South India at the height of the struggle for Indian independence. Recognizing that he draws from ancient Indian religious symbolism in his poetry, particularly in *The Waste Land*, we examine his reasons for considering the church union movement in India as something disastrous that would push the Anglican Church to lose its unique identity and become a member of a "society" rather than remain a church. From a postcolonial perspective, how do we interpret this stance of a poet who believed in the eternal cycle of life, death, and rejuvenation, and who, as an Anglican, feared that re-union would lead to the destruction of the unique tradition of his church? This essay explores the complex beginnings of the Church of South India

and how the we, the authors and members of this Church, embody in our own identities the hybridity, diversity, promise, and potential of one of the great movements toward the unity of the church in the twentieth century.

This essay is a collaborative effort. It is written in the context of celebrating the life and contributions of another public thinker, Kwok Pui-lan. Each of us have known her independently; we have been admirers of her writing for a long time now. Unlike T. S. Eliot, who allowed his imagination to be occupied by fears of destruction, Kwok Pui-lan, another Anglican, has not allowed fears about endings to occupy her imagination. A widely published scholar, a revered mentor, and a supportive colleague, she has allowed critical and creative imagination to accompany her scholarly pursuits.

For me, Mrinalini, paying tribute to Kwok Pui-lan entails an act of remembering, since it was nearly two decades ago that I was invited to make a presentation at a conference in Bossey, Switzerland.¹ Only a couple of years before, I had received my doctorate from the University of Hamburg for a project that engaged the postcolonial thinking of scholars such as Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak and Homi Bhabha. Since it was among the very first international conferences I was presenting at, I was excited about this chance to meet a group of scholars from different contexts. During one of our lunch breaks at the conference, when many had decided to return to their rooms for a post-lunch rest, Pui-lan announced that she was going to visit the grave of the famous actor Richard Burton, which was located within walking distance from the conference site. I did not want to let go of this opportunity to see the burial site of a famous actor and also the opportunity to walk with and talk to Pui-lan. She was already a well-established theological and feminist scholar who had become known for asking fundamental questions about intellectual history and the role played by power, both global and local, in the world of academics, knowledge, and culture. It was a walk worth taking because of Pui-lan, and because it gave me an opportunity to see the quiet and nondescript place, hidden by the shade of surrounding trees, that Burton had chosen for his final resting place. Her desire to walk all the way to the grave revealed to me an aspect of her character. Here

¹ I (Mrinalini) am grateful to her for referencing this in Kwok Pui-lan, *Postcolonial Imagination and Feminist Theology* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2005), 42n35.

was a critical thinker who was also an appreciator of art and performance. Even as she asks fundamental questions about knowledge—how do we know what we know?—even as she demands that we know what systems of patronage support the world of art and creativity, she has not rejected knowledge or creativity. It is therefore fitting that as we celebrate her achievements, we turn our attention to another Anglican who was a poet and a thinker. As a poet, T. S. Eliot was a modernist; as someone who converted to Anglicanism, he seemed to fear that an easy ‘merger’ of denominations in the soon to be independent India would be catastrophic to the Church of England.

For me, Kiran, the annual interactions with Kwok Pui-lan at the Asian Theological Summer Institute²—organized by Paul Rajashekar at the Lutheran Theological Seminary at Philadelphia, now the United Lutheran Seminary—were occasions to look forward to. This was where, with some of the brightest Asian and Asian American doctoral students and along with a wonderful group of faculty mentors, Pui-lan was in her element, teasing out critical thinking and challenging pat assertions from participants, and offering lists of new and old “treasures”—books and other resources—some that had been overlooked or others that had not yet been a part of public discourse. This setting, which was not just in a conference room but also spilled out into festive meals and social times filled with laughter and good cheer, was a context in which I relished her incredible gifts and graces, including that of faithful scholarship, empathetic mentorship, spiritually empowering worship, and cultural engagement. This type of environment continued even when the pandemic forced the 2020 Institute to be held via Zoom.

It is keeping in mind this global Anglican—who is known for her questioning of normative and universalist knowledge claims, and is one of the most gentle mentors who takes the ideas of her students and peers seriously—that we turn to a poet who was and is acknowledged and appreciated all over the world for his poetic output, and who also felt obliged to write a pamphlet when his Church sided with the proposal that in south India, the Anglican

² See <https://www.unitedlutheranseminary.edu/academics/institutes/asian-theological-summer-institute>.

church merge with other denominations to form a united Church of South India.

Starting from . . . the Two Epigraphs

In a strange and curious manner, the first epigraph to this essay demonstrates what the second epigraph states. The lines from “Little Gidding” by T. S. Eliot are evocative of the futility of holding on to an inviolable origin and the prospect of a new beginning when something seems to be ending. It is but ironic that when he became a conservatist Anglican, the very poet who said that the “end is where we start from” turned into an argumentative pamphleteer who questioned the proposal for the union of Protestant churches in another part of the world. In the pamphlet, he relentlessly argues against the formation of the Church of South India by speaking of “truth” and invoking falsehood.

The second epigraph is a citation from a contemporary Bishop of the Anglican Church who questioned Eliot’s “dogmatic assertions” against the proposed union of churches. It is ironic that the poet had to be told about the complex character of religious truth by a Bishop; it is strange that the man who imagined *The Waste Land* through an evocation and interweaving of texts from various literary, religious, and philosophical traditions had to now be reminded that “when men attempt to use human language for the clear-cut definition of divine truths they commonly end by magnifying their own differences.”³

This dialogue between the conservatist Anglican poet and the progressive Anglican Bishop can give us insights for understanding the conflicts of our own times. The poet and the Bishop were both public figures whose opinions mattered, especially to the regular members of the church, during turbulent times. Both of them tried to reason with Anglicans about the importance of a proposed move that was to have a bearing on the life of the Anglican Church. The dialogue also reminds us about an important aspect of the life of a public thinker. What occupies the imagination of a poet, a theologian, a leader whose opinions matter, both at the level of the institutions that they represent and the audience to whom they speak? How do we take insights from this radical opposition to the

³ A. T. P. Williams, *Church Union in South India – A Reply to Mr. T. S. Eliot’s ‘Reunion by Destruction’* (London: SCM Press Ltd., 1944), 10.

formation of the Church of South India to understand the challenges that we face in our own times?

We begin to answer our questions by looking at Eliot's own philosophical orientations and the background within which he had launched his attack on the proposal to unite Protestant denominations in south India.

An Outburst of Protest

Within the literary context, Eliot, a literary giant of the twentieth century, was a person who in his creative life was deeply indebted to and fascinated by India, especially Indian philosophy. His poetry had dared to question the way things had been and accepted, of which *The Waste Land* is looked upon as a seminal moment in world literature and has played a formative role in shaping the curriculum of literary studies in India. The literary critic Terry Eagleton, in discussing Eliot, describes his "social situation" as that of 'an aristocrat' American expatriate who became a glorified City clerk and yet identified deeply with the conservative-traditionalist, rather than bourgeois-commercialist, elements of English ideology."⁴ It is fascinating that Eliot was deeply influenced by his study of Indian philosophy and the *Bhagavad Gita*, something that he acknowledged and something that permeated not only in *The Waste Land* but also in his other writings.⁵ Among many other references and allusions, Eliot "specifically recalls the Buddha's Fire Sermon in the third section of *The Waste Land* and consciously brings the Buddha and St. Augustine together at the very core of the poem; he makes an equally incontrovertible appeal to the thunder of the *Brihadaranyaka Upanishad* in the final portion of *The Waste Land*."⁶ A scholar who analyzed his writings in various genres states that "Eliot perceived tradition as a unity in diversity. When he wrote of the ancient Indian philosophers that 'their subtleties make most of the great European philosophers look like schoolboys,' he was

⁴ Terry Eagleton, *Marxism and Literary Criticism*, Routledge Classics with a new preface (London and New York: Routledge, 2002 [1976]), 13.

⁵ K. S. Narayana Rao, "T. S. Eliot and the Bhagavad-Gita," *American Quarterly* 15, no. 4 (1963): 572-78.

⁶ P. S. Sri, "Upanishadic Perceptions in T. S. Eliot's Poetry and Drama," *Rocky Mountain Review* 62, no. 2 (2008): 34.

expressing awe at the Indian appreciation for the complexity of tradition.”⁷

The key word here is “tradition,” and we find it intriguing and instructive that there was so much opposition to the moves toward union in south India at various levels, especially from Anglican circles. Eliot’s own pamphlet was under the aegis of “The Council for the Defence of Church Principles.” The Council is self-identified in the inner front cover of the booklet as something that,

has been set up by the Church Union and other Church Societies as a temporary organisation for the preservation of those fundamental principles of the Faith and Order of the Catholic Church which are clearly taught and enjoined in the Book of Common Prayer, in the belief that without these principles, which are now endangered by certain reunion proposals, the attainment of œcumenical reunion and the maintenance of the unity of the Anglican Communion are alike impossible.⁸

There is no doubt that the efforts undertaken to form a united church in south India following the Edinburgh conference were met with a lot of questions and handwringing, let alone theological, ecclesiological, structural, and liturgical anguish. However, given Eliot’s prominence in the wider world and his abiding interest in Indian philosophy, a re-reading of this pamphlet is instructive.⁹

At the outset, Eliot sets out the reasons that prompted him to put down his thoughts in print “as an Anglican layman to the laity,” namely that it is an effort to address the reader “whose mind has neither hardened by bigotry nor fortified by argument, whose mind is easily tolerant but obstinately Anglican; the reader who would not wish to see the Church of England transformed or made

⁷ Jeffrey M. Perl and Andrew P. Tuck, “The Hidden Advantage of Tradition: On the Significance of T. S. Eliot’s Indic Studies,” *Philosophy East and West*, 35 no. 2 (1985): 125.

⁸ T. S. Eliot, *Reunion by Destruction: Reflections on a Scheme for Church Union in South India: Addressed to the Laity*, Pamphlet 7, The Council for the Defence of Church Principles (Westminster: Pax House, 1943), inside front cover.

⁹ This joint essay interweaves sections from J. Jayakiran Sebastian, “‘not hurrying on to a receding future, nor hankering after an imagined past’: Edinburgh 1910, T. S. Eliot, Postcolonial Missiology, and Our Mission to God,” *Bangalore Theological Forum* XLVI, no. 1 (June 2014): 79–92.

unfamiliar.”¹⁰ There is almost a sense of an unchanging monolithic stability, as far as the essence of what the Church of England is, in a world being steadily and irrevocably transformed by the ongoing world war and the ever growing demands for overturning colonialism. It is interesting that in the large, sweeping work by Robert Young, entitled *Postcolonialism: An Historical Introduction*, there is one reference (looking at a conference of “colonized peoples” held at Lausanne in the middle of the first world war) to the “arch-conservative” Eliot, and that is to a line from his 1922 poem, *The Waste Land*, “By the waters of Lemman I sat down and wept.”¹¹ This attitude to the demise of the world as Eliot knew it continues in the pamphlet when Eliot offers his interpretation of the events that had led to the point where the united church was poised to come into being, and in an echo of the Athens and Jerusalem dichotomy, says that while it may not be immediately clear as to why “events in places as remote as Tinevelly and Dornakal may have consequences in every parish in England,” he will show how this move, especially in terms of “inter-communion,” could prove to be “a concession without adequate compensation.”¹² The grounds for this judgment are that while “secession” is not envisaged – and it appears as if he would not have minded such a secession – he did have anxieties about the “foundation of this proposed Church” that “would necessitate the separation of the Anglican dioceses from the Church of India, Burma, and Ceylon.” The proposal would imply a “reunion” with non-conformists and ultimately result in members of the new church wanting “to remain in communion with the churches to which they at present belong.” But there is more, and Eliot asks what would happen when the generations shift and those “born and brought up in the new church” come to England.¹³ This is an alarming proposal in Eliot’s view because such a precedent in India could inspire a similar move back home, leading to the destruction of the Church of England. A careful and close reading of the pamphlet offers insights on his dilemma about inter-communion and its effect on his own church.

¹⁰ Eliot, *Reunion by Destruction*, 1.

¹¹ Robert J. C. Young, *Postcolonialism: An Historical Introduction* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 2001), 118–19.

¹² Eliot, *Reunion by Destruction*, 2–3.

¹³ Eliot, *Reunion by Destruction*, 3.

The Poet as Pamphleteer

In his writing, the poet turned pamphleteer strives to persuade the reader to agree with him that the formation of the Church of South India would have a disastrous effect on the Anglican Church.¹⁴ He understands well that the proposal came from a gathering that consisted mostly of Indian Christians and was considered favorably by the other Indian Christians. The proposal for union was very specific. It suggested that the Anglican Dioceses of India, Burma, and Ceylon separate from the Church of England and unite—especially in south India—with a number of other Protestant churches from other denominational backgrounds, to form a Church of South India.¹⁵ This was in itself not a problem for Eliot, had it been a case where the Anglican Dioceses in India “seceded” from the Church of England. For Eliot, the proposal is a doctrinal problem. The members of the yet to be formed Church of South India had wished to “remain in communion with the churches to which at present they belong.”¹⁶ This would amount to a “reunion” that would necessitate the destruction of the Church of England’s doctrinal foundation because it would call for inter-communion with those who are not from the Anglican Church, but through the union would now become associated with the Church of England. Moreover, he feared that the union of churches that did

¹⁴ Eliot, *Reunion by Destruction*, 1. The outlook for the Church of England is portrayed in cataclysmic terms: “The future of a Church of England, enlarged according to the pattern of South India, would be as an organ of the totalitarian state, charged with the preservation of morality in the interest of that state. It would be a National Church, not in the sense of representing the true religious spirit of the people, but as a department of the Board of Education. As a Church, it would only be a shell.” Eliot, *Reunion by Destruction*, 20–21. As for the work that went into reaching this stage, Eliot dismisses it with open contempt, calling it a “waste” and a “pantomime horse” and saying that the scheme would be “an utter failure, only if it is accepted and put into operation: if it is repudiated, it will, by providing a warning, have made its own contribution and achieved its own success.” Eliot, *Reunion by Destruction*, 21. For him, the only value to this would come about through its failure and collapse!

¹⁵ For the process of meetings and negotiations beginning early in the twentieth century that led up to the formation of the Church of South India, see Israel Selvanayagam, *The Greatest Act of Faith: The First Organic Union of the Church of South India* (Delhi: Christian World Imprints, 2019), Chapter Four “Venturing into a Faith Journey towards a Organic Union,” 111–38.

¹⁶ Eliot, *Reunion by Destruction*, 3.

not share the same doctrines would create a precedent which would be “inevitably proposed in England.”¹⁷

One of the realities that Eliot was contending with while writing was the enduring legacy of the World Missionary Conference, held in Edinburgh in 1910 and, as Brian Stanley puts it, was “The road which eventually led to the formation of the Church of South India in 1947, and of the Church of North India in 1970.”¹⁸ Looking back from today’s context, it is important to recollect that of the 1,215 delegates, there were only 18 non-Western participants at the conference, of whom “eight were Indians, four were Japanese, three were Chinese, one was Korean, one Burmese . . . and one was of Turkish origin.”¹⁹ With a touch of irony and humor not usual in a serious historical study, Stanley writes, “Whether delegates’ orientalist fascination with the exotic hindered or assisted their attentiveness to what the Asians had to say is a moot point, but there is some evidence in favour of the latter interpretation.”²⁰ One of these delegates who left an indelible mark on the conference through his “Give us friends” speech was V. S. Azariah, who two years later would become the first Indian to be consecrated an Anglican bishop in India. He went on to play a major role in moves toward bringing different denominations together, although he died before the inauguration of the Church of South India. It has been clearly pointed out that “The unity movement was one of the primary means by which Azariah became a world-renowned churchman . . . and he fearlessly upbraided western churches for not taking denominational divisions seriously enough.”²¹

Eliot is of the opinion that breaking the catholic Church into different denominations is an “inveterate sin,”²² and the desire to come together and form a united church in India—the Church of South India—is not a return to the original church, but a union that stems from Indian Christians’ current needs to belong together.

¹⁷ Eliot, *Reunion by Destruction*, 6.

¹⁸ Brian Stanley, *The World Missionary Conference, Edinburgh 1910* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2009), 310–11.

¹⁹ Stanley, *The World Missionary Conference*, 92.

²⁰ Stanley, *The World Missionary Conference*, 96.

²¹ Susan Billington Harper, *In the Shadow of the Mahatma: Bishop V. S. Azariah and the Travails of Christianity in British India* (Grand Rapids, MI/Cambridge, U.K: Eerdmans, 2000), 238.

²² Eliot, *Reunion by Destruction*, 7.

Hence, it is just “the instauration of a new unity.”²³ His primary criticism of such a union seems to be that it demands the coming together of divergent Christian traditions on the basis of a set of commonly accepted—and acceptable—doctrines. What is not acceptable among the doctrines is then left to be interpreted by the individuals. For him, the church to which he belongs, the doctrines that it embodies, and the order—including the liturgy—that it represents, are all part of the living faith tradition that stands in contrast to all other non-conformist church traditions. Hence, he repeats allusion to truth and falsehood²⁴ and what he sees as resulting in the “peace of death.”²⁵ The church that results from such a union built upon a common denominator of doctrines that are acceptable to all, in his view, would make it more like a society rather than the living, universal Church that is “sustained by the Holy Ghost.”²⁶

The Church of England has always regarded itself, as have the Eastern Churches, as a living member of one visible Church: it does not concede that it was founded (in the sense in which a local church has had a human founder) by Henry VII, or by the Regents of Edward VI, or by Queen Elizabeth, but holds itself to derive from Augustine. If its members are to enter into a union, on terms of complete parity, with non-conformists, they must acknowledge that they are leaving a church and entering a society. And if the Church of England associates itself with this new “church,” on terms of inter-communion, then it also is surrendering its claim to be a church, and is accepting the status of a society.²⁷

The non-conformists—the Methodists, the Presbyterians, and the Congregationalists—assume that they are “in possession of some part of excellence and truth,” and therefore, in a way, believe that “everybody is right.”²⁸ Such a mixing of parts of truth, in Eliot’s view, can only give rise to a “phantom unity of a Church with no

²³ Eliot, *Reunion by Destruction*, 7.

²⁴ Eliot, *Reunion by Destruction*, 7.

²⁵ Eliot, *Reunion by Destruction*, 19.

²⁶ Eliot, *Reunion by Destruction*, 12–13.

²⁷ Eliot, *Reunion by Destruction*, 13.

²⁸ Eliot, *Reunion by Destruction*, 7.

doctrine at all.”²⁹ Eliot firmly believes that a mixing of doctrines of the different churches, especially with regards to matters of such importance as the Eucharist and Apostolic Succession, would in itself give rise to a “new and revolutionary doctrine: the doctrine that a number of doctrines are not doctrines, but are matters for private opinion.”³⁰ He talks about “every party and every individual” entering the proposed church “bringing all their doctrinal furniture and liturgical baggage with them.”³¹

Eliot is also worried that such a union would deepen the schism between the Anglican Church and the Orthodox Churches of Eastern Europe.³² The arguments extended *for* the union are in fact, Eliot says, “arguments about *division*,” and this raises in him the concern that the Church of England may be “*destroyed*” because of such a union.³³ This “destruction” of the Anglican Church will not be immediately visible because when doctrinal differences are presented as matters of individual interpretations, there is no inclination for the churches to fight among themselves. However, it would have long-term consequences:

The majority of people are not theologically minded, and are indisposed to change; they would remain within the form of the Church of England. The gradual disappearance of Christian spiritual values, the substitution of words for realities, of humanism for faith, would be imperceptible to them. There would be plenty of religious currency to go around, and few would notice the extent to which the coinage had been debased. The tendency of the present time is to insist upon *quantity* and *distribution*—education, in matters of social justice, and in religion: but a noble zeal is in this perverted, when *quality* is allowed to decline.³⁴

²⁹ Eliot, *Reunion by Destruction*, 18.

³⁰ Eliot, *Reunion by Destruction*, 18.

³¹ Eliot, *Reunion by Destruction*, 11.

³² Eliot, *Reunion by Destruction*, 18.

³³ Eliot, *Reunion by Destruction*, 18. Emphasis on the words “*division*” and “*destroyed*” are in the original text. We find it intriguing that Eliot uses the analogy of sanitation when talking about the Church of South India, saying “unsanitary dwellings in a nineteenth-century industrial town does not excuse the omission of plumbing from the plans for a new industrial centre.” Eliot, *Reunion by Destruction*, 17. Are there echoes of the “dirty” India, which continues to repel and fascinate visitors even today?

³⁴ Eliot, *Reunion by Destruction*, 20. Emphasis in the original.

We have a clue here about Eliot's anxiety. He fears that his own church—the Anglican Church—would eventually be irrevocably distorted and lose its “quality” because of the formation of the Church of South India. He fears that spirituality will gradually erode in the Church of England as faith would be replaced by humanism and realities would be replaced by words. Looking for just a common core of doctrines that would bring together the different Protestant denominations in South India would have such an adverse effect on his own church that it would ultimately become “only a shell.”³⁵ Lurking behind Eliot's consideration of the possible waning of spirituality is a clear concern that the quality of Anglicanism will decline if his church insists on “quantity and distribution.” When we look again at the words “quality,” “quantity,” and “distribution,” from the point of view of someone who has been formed by the post-union realities of the Church of South India, one wonders if all the carefully worded arguments about doctrines are about a particular notion of “quality” that Eliot fears would get lost by a creative expansion of the churches with whom the Anglican Church might stay in communion.

The pamphlet concludes with an additional argument that is striking. Even though throughout the pamphlet, his fears were about the non-negotiable doctrines of a spiritual community, Eliot's concluding remarks invoke cultural and sociological problems involved in the union of different denominations:

For what we have yet to learn, in our approaches to reunion, is the complexity of the problems: we have to learn that verbal agreement alone offers but a spectral unity; that we have to unite, not only phrases, but cultures; that protocols and concordats are vain without assimilation of sensibility; that we have to deal with human beings with human passions; and that sociological issues are involved, which far exceed what is ordinarily assumed to be the subject-matter of theology.³⁶

One wonders if Eliot was indeed more worried about the cultural and sociological issues involved in the proposed union than the theological and the doctrinal issues. There is no doubt that Eliot has thought long and deeply about this matter and is aware of the

³⁵ Eliot, *Reunion by Destruction*, 21

³⁶ Eliot, *Reunion by Destruction*, 21.

complex series of debates and discussions that have brought the negotiations to the point where it appears it is only a matter of time before the new united church comes into being. He offers two possible ways of addressing the issue of "reunion." One is where divisions result from "our primary sin . . . not against each other, but against God. Any scheme of reunion, then, must be conceived in repentance, and delivered in reparation." The other view, and this is where he locates the movement in south India, is aiming "not so much at the restoration of any previous unity, as the instauration of a new unity."³⁷ There is an almost ominous relentlessness in the certainty that Eliot espouses, especially the certainty of "truth" and an unwillingness to even consider whether the Spirit is leading the churches to an unveiling of truth in this new context. In terms of the dominant Indian philosophical tradition, Eliot was undoubtedly not just influenced but also indebted to it, as demonstrated by his appreciation and appropriation of it in his creative and imaginative poetic constructions. However, when it came to the possible flowering of the church in what would quickly be a postcolonial set up, we find him almost enraged by the possibility of the dilution of what he held to be the "truth." For him, the faith of the church is at stake and the coming into existence of the united Church of South India, with all the adjustments to the structures that this entails, will irrevocably bear upon the faith of the church as he affirms and knows it, and that for him is intolerable, since, as he crudely puts it "The Church of South India is a *pre-fabricated* church."³⁸

Union and Beyond

What do T. S. Eliot's long lamentations about the dangers of the union of churches in South India tell us today? The church union took place despite Eliot's fears. We know that this union did not cause the destruction of the Church of England as Eliot had feared. Interestingly, the union has resulted in a united church that leans more towards its Anglican heritage. At a time when so-called mainline churches are decreasing in size in North America and Europe, churches are filled to the brim even at a regular service in the Indian context. In hindsight, for those of us who belong to the Church of South India, Eliot's pamphlet against the union of

³⁷ Eliot, *Reunion by Destruction*, 7.

³⁸ Eliot, *Reunion by Destruction*, 12

churches in South India might appear like a document that lacks in imagination and historical understanding. Perhaps, he would have benefited from reading some of the writings of Kwok Pui-lan about postcolonial imagination. Perhaps, he would have realized that he failed to include Orthodox churches in India in his lamentation about the lost opportunity for the Church of England to unite with Eastern churches. Perhaps, he would have set words such as “heresy” and “tradition” in a historical context and explored the complex political and ecclesiological challenges that caused the breaking away of groups from the claims of the church universal.

And perhaps we need to set Eliot in his own context. He speaks of losing “one’s identity in a mass movement of licentious oecumenicity”³⁹ during the 1940s, when the plans for the coming together of most of the Christian churches worldwide were already underway. His words echo the fears of groups that are opposed to any plans for large-scale cooperation among communities. As the Bishop of Durham, A. T. P. Williams, rightly points out in his response to Eliot’s pamphlet, in ecumenical co-operation, differences are not dissolved but co-operation is still possible because “wide divergence is not the same as radical contradiction.”⁴⁰ In Eliot’s view, however, the differences between the Anglicans and the “non-conformists” are radical and hence do not allow for any kind of coming together. In terms of fulfilling “imperial desires,”⁴¹ there is obviously something deeper here. India, and things Indian, played a major role in shaping the European imagination from the time of Alexander the Great, then the Roman republic and empire, and on through the colonial enterprise. Was there something even deeper here of recognizing that India and things Indian played a major role in the European imagination not just during the colonial period, but

³⁹ Eliot, *Reunion by Destruction*, 19.

⁴⁰ Williams, *Church Union*, 11. Williams also writes: “Disputes about Church Order and partisan over-stressing of a particular theory of episcopacy, neither to be proved by the New Testament nor steadily upheld in Anglican history nor supported by any consensus of recognized authorities, have absorbed too much attention and have contributed to blur more significant cleavages within, not between, the Churches.” Williams, *Church Union*, 13. For other aspects of the debate, including interaction with Catholics, see James G. Leachman, “Correspondence on ‘Social Doctrine’ for the Church of England and the Proposed Church of South India, 1941,” *Sewanee Theological Review* 53, no. 1 (2009): 140–49.

⁴¹ Grant Parker, *The Making of Roman India* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 318.

even from the time of Alexander the Great and the Romans, especially in terms of fulfilling “imperial desires”? Eliot’s pamphlet gives us a glimpse into the workings of the mind of a conservatist who, in his deep commitment to his faith tradition, deems everything else non-negotiable and comes across as an imperialist. Isn’t this the challenge that we face in our own times: the deep divisions between groups who deem, without any reference to the other’s position, that only they hold access to truth and the only truth? Have we not been reminded again and again, as the Bishop of Durham sought to remind Eliot long ago, that religious truth is complex and that options for co-operation are innumerable if we do not always perceive “wide divergence” as “radical contradiction”? Should we not allow for the working of the Spirit in an ecumenical and co-operative move in the 1940s resulting in the formation of the Church of South India?⁴²

In a major article on the Church of South India, the church historian George Oommen, writing about the process building up to the union, notes, “No one involved in the [union] negotiations had any clarity about the concrete shape that the united church would finally take. All were open to the possibility of God’s acting in and through the new church.”⁴³ Our examination of Eliot’s pamphlet and the intensity of feelings to which it testifies offers us much to reflect upon, more than 110 years after the Edinburgh 1910 meeting and almost 75 years after both the nation-state of India and the united Church of South India came into existence. Missiological thinking and praxis have been deeply impacted by the postcolonial turn in cultural studies, where smug, self-contained, dominant ways of reading and interpreting are constantly called into question. Sugirtharajah puts it well when he writes, “Interpretation is a struggle between instinctive, untutored, untheorized modes of appropriation and institutional conventions, codes, practices, and doctrinal manipulation. One has to work against dominant meanings to produce new knowledge or to deepen or indeed to problematize well-established positions.”⁴⁴ There is a warning here

⁴² For a compact and clear explication of the process that led to the formation of the Church of South India, see Brian Stanley, *Christianity in the Twentieth Century: A World History* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2018), 133–40.

⁴³ George Oommen, “Challenging Identity and Crossing Borders: Unity in the Church of South India,” *Word and World* 25, no. 1 (2005): 62.

⁴⁴ R. S. Sugirtharajah, *Postcolonial Criticism and Biblical Interpretation* (Oxford:

as well to all the members of the Church of South India, which has over the decades become a dominant institution. Almost three-quarters of a century after the formation of the Church of South India, is it time for us to reframe Eliot's questions about the church losing its spiritual core and turning into a society?⁴⁵

It is easy for us to be wise in hindsight and project ourselves backwards in time. Nevertheless, what is intriguing is the palpable fear and angst that comes through in Eliot's manner of writing and thinking, that *if* the scheme went forward, it would be the end of the church as Eliot knew it. Perhaps he was being prescient. The formation of the Church of South India in 1947 forced the ecumenical world to look at issues regarding the unity of the church, especially in terms of "visible" unity, in a new and fresh way, and the ecumenical movement continues to feel the consequences of this act. This is not just in terms of ongoing publications and interactions with this theme, but in terms of efforts in different parts of the world to give expression to *koinonia* and unity in a broken and fragmented world, although ongoing challenges, including that of corruption and power-mongering within the united Church of South India, remain, not to say anything about the relationship today with the Church of England and the world-wide Anglican communion, something that has recently been valorized and affirmed to the detriment of the other partners in the union movement.

In his views on the union of churches in south India, the pamphleteer Eliot seems to overwhelm the creative spirit of the poet Eliot. And yet, his loud criticism did not stop others from envisaging a new kind of ecumenical cooperation. While much harm has been done in obstructing the blossoming of the unity of the church by dominant voices such as those of Eliot, much good has also transpired by those willing to consider and envisage that another world, another way of thinking, is possible.⁴⁶

Oxford University Press, 2002), 203–4.

⁴⁵ See the painfully honest and deeply disturbing analysis in Selvanayagam, *The Greatest Act of Faith*, especially Chapter Seven, "Distortion of Organic Union by Absorption into the Anglican Communion," 177–228. The lingering question for us is to what extent Eliot's fears actually came true in a different way.

⁴⁶ See Joseph G. Muthuraj, *We Began at Tranquebar: Vol. II – The Origin and Development of the Anglican – CSI Episcopacy in India (1813–1947)* (Delhi: ISPCK, 2010), 325–326, who refers to Eliot, and notes that his "destructive remark does not float on forever!"

Conclusion: "A Theology Not Careless of History"⁴⁷

In conclusion, we would like to reiterate two questions that we asked earlier in this essay: What occupies the imagination of a poet, a theologian, a leader whose opinions matter, both at the level of the institutions that they represent and the audience to whom they speak? How do we take insights from this radical opposition to the formation of the Church of South India to understand the radical challenges of our own times?

Eliot was compelled to produce this pamphlet by fear and anxiety about the future of a Church to which he belonged and whose doctrinal core sustained his spirituality. And yet, his fears were based on assumptions that the quality of his church, its doctrinal core, and its spiritual drive would weaken if this union was allowed. In his fears about the "cancel culture" mentality that this might result in, he was unwilling to be mindful of history and historical inequities, including the inequity caused by colonialism. As a well-respected poet, Eliot was in a position to shape the opinion of his readers. The Bishop of Durham, A. T. P. Williams, tells us that he feels compelled to respond to Eliot's criticism because anything "that Mr. Eliot writes is likely to be read and to deserve reading."⁴⁸ Like us, Williams also senses that Eliot's strong criticism of the proposal for the union of churches in South India is likely to appeal to a public that was "unfortunately but not altogether inexcusably ill-acquainted both with the details of the Scheme of the Union, with the long negotiations out of which it has come, and with the special conditions which it attempts to satisfy."⁴⁹ This is a real danger that we have witnessed in our own times: the power of public figures to deepen fears and anxieties in the minds of their readers and listeners who are fed disinformation. The Bishop of Durham called for an examination of the "grounds of this persuasion"⁵⁰ that the union of churches would end in disaster, and he finds that the grounds are assumptions and fears rather than a careful understanding of history. In the end, the persuasive tactics used by Eliot would have

⁴⁷ Williams, *Church Union in South India: A Reply to Mr. T. S. Eliot's 'Reunion by Destruction,'* 13.

⁴⁸ Williams, *Church Union*, 4.

⁴⁹ Williams, *Church Union*, 3.

⁵⁰ Williams, *Church Union*, 4.

led to a failure of dialog instead of creating a context for conversation because it lacked imagination.

This is precisely where Kwok Pui-lan can help us make sense of the deep divides in our society and hint at a way out of this chasm. Her use of “dialogical imagination” does not preclude criticism. In fact, it reminds us that we are in need of a theology that is not “careless of history” but acutely aware of history and of current systemic inequities. Her entire body of writings has argued that in order to arrive at critique, we have to have a sound grounding in information, especially information in terms of the history of theology and biblical studies. She has also reminded us that it is not enough to acquire knowledge for the sake of knowledge, but we must ask questions about the politics of knowledge: how do we know what we know and what are the connections between knowledge—often naively assumed as “objective” and the politics of its production and dissemination. If we wonder if it means that there are alternative facts about knowledge, then the answer is “no.” Through her writings, Pui-lan has repeatedly reminded us about the “profoundly complex character of religious truth,” and has made us aware of the fact that “when we attempt to use human language for the clear-cut definition of divine truths they commonly end by magnifying [our] real differences.”⁵¹

Most profoundly, Pui-lan has presented us with a way out of our well-thought words becoming just word-play in narrowly-focused identitarian and interest-group politics. She takes pride in being a teacher and a mentor. That is the exemplar that she has set before us. Unlike Eliot the poet who turned into Eliot the pamphleteer who allowed his fears to cloud his imagination, Pui-lan the postcolonial critic, theologian, and interpreter of the Bible does not lose sight of the power of critical dialog even when the common grounds for dialog are slippery. She manages to do so by actively engaging in teaching and mentoring. She is a true Asian guru to her mentees: a person of embodied spiritualism, a critical thinker who encourages critical thinking that is careful about history and historical inequities, a well-informed and well-published scholar,

⁵¹ We have used here excerpts from Bishop Williams’ challenge to Eliot because they do represent the complex realities of our own times. See Williams, *Church Union*, 10.

and an uncompromising speaker of truth to powers and principalities.

In writing about the religious factor in relation to ideology and social vision, Wole Soyinka pointedly says that

“[t]hanks to the tendency of the modern consumer-mind to facilitate digestion by putting in strict categories what are essentially fluid operations of the creative mind upon social and natural phenomena, the formulation of a literary ideology tends to congeal sooner or later into instant capsules which, administered also to the writer, may end up asphyxiating the creative process.”⁵²

The creative process cannot be allowed to wither and die by being asphyxiated. The triple “Shantih” with which Eliot ends *The Waste Land* should not be the peace of abandoned efforts to work toward the unity of the church, but it should echo the creative tension brought into being by opening up new, fresh, distinct, and imaginative possibilities that respond to the breath of the creative spirit that blows where she wills and sets hearts, minds, and lives aflutter with the freshness of getting caught up in the understanding of our mission to God.

⁵² Wole Soyinka, *Myth, Literature, and the African World* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1976), 61.

A Critical Feminist Biblical Hermeneutics of Liberation

Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza

Although the field of biblical Interpretation has been heavily influenced by German scholarship in the last century, such dominant German scholarship was neither feminist nor defined by wo/men¹ scholars. While my roots are German, I have long worked in the context of North American higher education, and like many immigrants, my life has been shaped by a bi-cultural identity and complex, intersecting concerns. I share that immigrant perspective with my beloved colleague, Kwok Pui-lan. However, unlike her origins in China, both of my cultural worlds are rooted in Christianity, which remains a dominant kyriarchal force in North America and Europe as well as many other countries colonized by the West (see my definition of kyriarchy below).

Because my career as a professor has been located in the US, I have had the great privilege of working with many colleagues who share complex identities, and Kwok Pui-lan has been crucial as a dialogue partner. I found her book *Discovering the Bible in the Non-Biblical World*² illuminating in its presentation of the journey of discovering the Bible as an Asian wo/man theologian, in a culture where the dominant forces of patriarchy are not Christian and where Christianity is utilized as a dissident voice for human rights and feminist liberation. I support Asian feminists' challenges to Western and White feminist postcolonial critics for constructing a dual

¹ "Wo/man" with a slash indicates that there is no unified essence shared by all women, but rather that the category "woman" is always already fractured and inflected by many other structures of oppression, including race, class, sexuality, and so forth. Further, "wo/men" should be understood in an inclusive sense, which includes marginalized and subordinated men

² Kwok Pui-lan, *Discovering the Bible in the Non-Biblical World* (Oregon: Wipf & Stock, 2003).

system of racism and imperialism when they do not attend to the intersectional analyses of global feminists. It was my great pleasure to have had several years of working closely with Kwok Pui-lan as we co-edited *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion*, where we sought to publish the work that included complex, multilayered understandings of identity, complex analyses of multiplicative systems of domination, and a profound commitment to dismantling kyriarchy and to the liberating oppressed peoples.

In this essay, I will explain each of the terms in my title and why each is needed in doing biblical interpretation and theology. I also interrelate the terms as qualifiers of each other and discuss how they must be used to construct “A Critical Feminist Biblical Hermeneutics of Liberation.”

Defining Critical

I employ “critique” and “critical” in their original sense of “crisis,” which is derived from the Greek word *krinein/krisis*, meaning evaluation and judgment. “Critique” and “critical” are often understood in a negative, deconstructive, and cynical sense. For example, the common English dictionary definition is “judging severely and finding fault.”³ However, critical thinking is a complex process of conceptualization, analysis, synthesis, and evaluation of information and arguments. It involves the pursuit of fairness, accuracy, firm evidence, clarity, precision, and logical consistency both in one’s own work and that of others.

Based on this definition, a critical *method* is interested in “weighing, evaluating, judging and adjudicating situations and texts, or ‘putting them into crisis.’” A critical method thus has the opposite goals and functions from those that a positivist scientific method espouses. Moreover, in contrast to influential hegemonic hermeneutics which look for the “true” meaning of the text and do not critically question such meaning, a critical method focuses not only on the rhetorical nature of all inquiry and the rhetorical nature of sacred texts, but also on the power relations which are inscribed in texts and in which texts themselves are embedded.

³ OED Online, s.v. “critical (*adj.*),” accessed December 2020, https://www.oed-com.ezp-prod1.hul.harvard.edu/view/Entry/44592?r_redirectedFrom=critical.

Defining Feminist

It is necessary to explain why and how I use the term feminist here, since for many people feminism is still associated with ideological prejudice and unscientific bias. First, it should be noted that in this analysis, being a wo/man is not sufficient for generating feminist knowledge. Rather, feminist inquiry is a critical theory and intellectual practice that requires a process of conscientization and engagement in struggles for transformation.⁴

A well-known bumper sticker asserts tongue-in-cheek that “feminism is the radical notion that women are people.” This definition, ascribed to rhetoric scholars Cheri Kramarae and Paula Treichler, accentuates that feminism is a radical concept and at the same time ironically underscores that at the beginning of the twenty-first century, feminism should be a common sense notion. Wo/men are full decision-making citizens, *not* ladies, wives, handmaids, seductresses, or beasts of burden. It alludes to the American democratic motto “We, the people” and positions feminism within radical democratic discourses that argue for the rights of all people. It evokes memories of struggles for equal citizenship and decision-making powers in society and religion. It asserts that all wo/men are historical agents.

In the past and in the present, feminist movements have emerged from the participation of wo/men in emancipatory struggles, such as the struggles for full democratic citizenship, religious freedom, abolition of slavery, civil rights, national and cultural independence, as well as those of the ecological, labor, peace, and LGBT movements. In these struggles for religious, civil, and human rights, feminists have learned that words such as “human” or “worker” or “civil society” are gender-typed and often do not mean and do not include the rights and interests of wo/men. Therefore, any scholarship that claims to be liberatory and transformative must focus specifically on the struggle for wo/men’s rights and self-determination in society and religion. Feminist movements are engendered and renewed by wo/men’s participation in emancipatory democratic struggles, a participation which leads to a different self-understanding and systemic analysis of “common sense” perceptions and visions of the world. Such a

⁴ Maria Pilar Aquino, “Latin American Feminist Theology,” *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion* 14, no. 1 (1998): 89-108.

different understanding in turn leads to the articulation of a feminist politics and spirituality that can empower wo/men to bring about further change in society and religion. In sum, feminism is a theory and practice of justice that does not seek simply to understand but to change relations of marginalization and domination.

Feminist “conscientization” or “consciousness-raising” makes one realize that cultural common sense, dominant perspectives, scientific theories, and historical knowledge are not only androcentric, that is, male-centered, but they are *kyriocentric*, that is, elite male or master-centered. Malestream language and science do not give an objective, value-neutral account of reality. Rather, by making marginalization and stereotypes appear as “natural” or “common sense,” they interpret, construct, and legitimize reality from the elite Western male perspective and in the interest of relations of exclusion and domination. Thus, the root-experience of feminism is to realize that cultural common sense, dominant perspectives, scientific theories, and historical knowledge are not objective accounts of reality but work instead to produce ideological mystifications of the structures of domination and subordination.

Defining Critical Feminist Analysis

In opposition to linguistic classifications of gender, a critical feminist analysis must challenge traditional gendered understandings of male and female and examine other interlocking oppressions beyond gender. According to *Merriam-Webster's Dictionary*, “gender” derives from the Latin *gener*, which means genus, birth, race, kind, gender. It refers to (1) “sex” and (2) “a subclass within a grammatical class (as noun, pronoun, adjective, or verb) of a language that is partly arbitrary but also partly based on distinguishable characteristics (as shape, social rank, manner of existence, or sex) and that determines agreement with and selection of other words or grammatical forms.”⁵ In English, gender is a dualistic classification system distinguishing the sexes as male and female, masculine and feminine, man and woman. Already before birth, we are indexed either as girls or boys. Countless questionnaires continue to re-inscribe this classification when they invite us to identify either as male (m) or as female (f).

⁵ *Merriam-Webster.com*, s.v. “gender (n.),” <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/gender>.

In Western societies, only two genders are thought to exist, and they are understood as mutually exclusive and, at best, as complementary: one is either a woman or a man but not both. Rather than stressing the common traits shared by women and men in contrast to, for instance, mice or rocks, western linguistic systems construct gender dichotomies and naturalize them with reference to biological sex. Generally, *male/female* classifies beings primarily on the basis of anatomical differences; *men/women* connotes social agents; and *masculine/feminine* expresses cultural-religious ideals, norms, values, and standards appropriate to one's gender position. The cultural construction of male/female, masculine/feminine, as both complementary and mutually exclusive categories constitutes the western sex/gender system that correlates sex to cultural contents according to social hierarchies and values.

Gender has been pioneered as a key analytical term in critical feminist analysis, not a natural given but as a societal construct, a socio-cultural principle of classification that imposes psychological, social, cultural, religious and political meaning upon biological sexual identity. Whereas in the 1970s, women's studies distinguished social gender from biological sex, in the mid-1980s, gender studies have emerged as a distinct field of inquiry within feminist criticism, based upon the assertion that both sex and gender are socio-cultural constructs which together constitute the western sex/gender system. As an ideological structure, gender is active through grammar, language, biology, and culture in naturalizing and making its construction of gender differences "common sense."

Just as with the grammatical, so also the social classification of gender does not always correspond to the biological classification of sex. Anthropologists have pointed out that not all cultures and languages know of only two sexes/genders, and historians of gender have argued that even in Western cultures the dual sex/gender system is of modern origins. Thomas Laqueur, for instance, has shown that a decisive shift took place in modernity: a shift from the ancient one-sex model to the present dichotomous, two-sex model.⁶ For thousands of years, it was considered to be commonplace that women had the same sex and genitals as men except that they were inside their bodies whereas men's were

⁶ Thomas Laqueur, *Making Sex: Body and Gender from the Greeks to Freud* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1990).

outside. The vagina was understood as an interior penis, the labia as foreskin, the uterus as scrotum, and the ovaries as testicles. It was not sex but gender which was the primary category determining the social-political order. What it meant to be a man or a woman in the ancient one-sex model was determined by social rank and by one's place in society, not by sexual organs. As man or woman, one had to perform a cultural role according to one's social status that was not thought to be organically one of two incommensurable sexes. It was not biological sex but the social status of the elite propertied male heads of household that determined superior gender status. The ancients did not need the facts of sexual difference to support the claim that women were inferior to men and therefore subordinate beings.

The two-sex model, the notion that there are two stable, incommensurable, opposite sexes, emerged during the Enlightenment. It was held that the economic, political, and cultural lives of women and men and their gender roles were based on two incommensurable sexes which were biologically given. Just as in antiquity, the body was seen as reflecting the cosmological order, so in modernity, the body and sexuality were seen as representing and legitimating the social-political order. Social and political changes wrought by the Enlightenment produced the change from the one-sex to the two-sex model. Since the Enlightenment's universalistic rhetoric for human liberty and equality seemed to include freeborn wo/men, new arguments had to be fashioned to justify their exclusion and maintain male dominance over the public domain.

The promise of democracy, that wo/men and disenfranchised men could achieve civic and personal liberties, generated a new kind of antifeminist argument on the basis of nature, physiology, and science. Those who opposed, for instance, the democratic participation of freeborn wo/men generated evidence for wo/men's mental and physical unsuitability for the public sphere by arguing that their bodies and biology made them unfit to do so. The doctrine of "separate spheres" for men and women thus engendered the dual sex model. It also shattered the notion of a male hierarchy, or better, kyriarchy. During the Enlightenment, antifeminist and even feminist discourses construed woman as totally different from man rather than as *lesser man*. Woman was of a "purer race," an "angelic species" less affected by sexual drives and desires. Since women had to be excluded from the new civil society because of their biology,

the catalogues of physical and moral differences between men and women sought to ensure that woman and man ought not to resemble each other in mind any more than in body. Two incommensurable sexes were the result of these discursive exclusionary practices. Similar arguments were put forward to exclude the so-called “darker races” and “uncivilized savages” from assuming civic responsibilities and powers. The distinction between biological sex and cultural gender, as well as between race and ethnicity, that have become common sense even in feminist discourses, is a product and process of antifeminist as well as emancipatory Enlightenment discourses that have located differences within the dualistic framework of the modern sex-gender system.

Before the analytic category “gender” became dominant, feminist analysis used “patriarchy” as a key-concept for analyzing discrimination and relations of domination. Whereas “patriarchy” was generally understood in anthropological and social studies terms as the power of the father over his kinship group, in the 1970s, feminists developed theories of patriarchy as a social system which maintains men’s social, ideological, sexual, and political dominance over wo/men. Since “gender” has become a primary framework of analysis, this emphasis on social, ideological, and political dominance has been lost.

In light of minoritized wo/men in the US and “Two-Thirds World” feminists’ critique of such a universalizing dualistic analytic as patriarchy,⁷ I have sought to look for a more intersectional and appropriate term, proposing *kyriarchy* instead. Kyriarchy is not defined in terms of gender, but in the classical Aristotelian sense, as the subordination and exploitation of wo/men who are differently located on the kyriarchal pyramid of interwoven structural discriminations and oppressions, including how some wo/men dominate other wo/men. This definition highlights that any theory or praxis of emancipation and liberation that does not explicitly consider interlocking oppressions, such as sexism, racism, colonialism, class-exploitation and ageism, is inadequate.

⁷ I wrote my foundational article “Feminist Theology as a Critical Theology of Liberation” in 1974/75 at the time when the Combahee River Collective wrote the foundational statement for Black Feminism. See Keeanga-Yamahtta Taylor, ed., *Black Feminism and the Combahee River Collective* (Chicago: Haymarket Books, 2017).

Since “patriarchy” continued to be understood as the domination of all men over all wo/men, a new word was needed to name the power structure of these multiplicative intersecting injustices, discriminations, and oppressions. Hence, in the late eighties and early nineties, at the same time the concept of intersectionality was articulated by Kimberlé Crenshaw,⁸ I coined a new term: kyriarchy/kyriocentrism (the rule of elite propertied males over women and subordinated men, a term derived from the Greek words *kyrios* [lord/slave-master/ father/husband/elite propertied male] and *archein* [to rule and dominate]). The concept “kyriarchy”⁹ as a replacement of the commonly used term patriarchy is necessary for three reasons:

- (1) to avoid the misunderstanding of patriarchy in the dualistic, generalized sense as power of men over wo/men,
- (2) to underscore the complex inter-structuring of domination, and
- (3) to situate sexism and misogyny in a broader range of oppressions.

This neologism seeks to name the embeddedness of wo/men’s oppression in the entire domain of Western society, culture, and religion, and thereby to reveal that the subordination and exploitation of wo/men is crucial to the maintenance of such a society, culture, and religion. Hence, no adequate hermeneutical theory or praxis of social, political, and cultural change is possible that does not take explicitly into account the multiplicative interlocking structures of wo/men’s oppression.

In my view, feminism is therefore concerned not just with gender inequities and marginalization, but also with kyriarchal domination. This is the case because kyriarchy not only perpetrates dehumanizing sexism and gender stereotypes but also other forms of wo/men’s oppression, such as racism, poverty, religious

⁸ Kimberlé Crenshaw, “Mapping the Margins: Intersectionality, Identity Politics, and Violence against Women of Color,” *Stanford Law Review* 43, no. 6 (1991): 1241–99.

⁹ The term kyriarchy has found attention on the internet, but not been recognized either by the biblical guild or by feminist studies in religion. See for instance N. Osborne, “Intersectionality and Kyriarchy: A Framework for approaching power and social justice in planning and climate change adaptation,” *Planning Theory* 14, no. 2 (2015): 130–151; Sian Ferguson, “Kyriarchy 101: We’re Not Just Fighting the Patriarchy Anymore,” *everydayfeminism*, April 23, 2014, <https://everydayfeminism.com/2014/04/kyriarchy-101/>.

exclusion, or colonialism. Accordingly, critical feminist studies has the goal of altering fundamentally the nature of our knowledge of the world by exposing its deformations and limitations in and through androcentrism, heterosexism, racism, classism, and cultural imperialism, and by reconstructing more diverse, more comprehensive, and more adequate accounts of the world.

Thus, a critical feminist hermeneutics includes a critical gender analysis but is not identical with it, because wo/men are not only determined by gender but also by other oppressions. Since biblical texts were articulated in a definite moment of history, their possible meanings are historically, politically, and contextually circumscribed. Hence, as noted above, I use wo/man with a slash in order to indicate that wo/men are not defined by a feminine essence, which they supposedly all have in common, and that they are divided and fragmented by kyriarchal structures of domination—that is, by sex, gender, race, class and colonialism. As an analytical category, kyriarchy demonstrates that upper class, wealthy wo/men, frequently called “ladies,” share in such kyriarchal power, albeit in a subordinate form to “lords,” and that some men are also subordinated to the *kyrios* by race, sex, class, and colonialism.

Defining a Critical Feminist Hermeneutics

For these reasons, while feminist studies is distinct from women’s and gender studies, it is inclusive of them. The title “wo/men’s studies” is ambiguous and can be understood either in an objectifying scientific sense as study *about* wo/men or gender, or feminist terms as study *by* wo/men. However, “gender studies” can only be understood in an objectifying and not in an agentive sense, and has therefore become the preferred title in the neoliberal academy because it does not explicitly include intersecting structures of exploitation and domination, it does not focus on wo/men but on masculine/feminine, and it is often done from a gender positivist rather than a gender critical, feminist perspective. In contrast, feminist studies explicitly stresses wo/men’s agency and authority as intellectual religious subjects. It seeks not just to understand but also to change and transform wo/men’s situations of cultural-religious silencing, marginalization, and oppression. Strictly speaking, feminist studies moves beyond just hermeneutics. Therefore, it is necessary to braid together the theoretical approaches

of hermeneutics, rhetoric, and ideology critique in order to fashion a method of critical inquiry that is oriented toward justice, emancipation, and liberation.

As a theory and practice of justice, feminist studies in religion can be appreciated only if seen in its entirety, including its particular historical-social locations. Its rhetorical aims, theoretical arguments, and religious passions must be understood as both empowered and limited by the socio-political and academic-religious contexts in which it operates. Consequently, a critical feminist hermeneutics of liberation aims to transform malestream hermeneutical and the*logical discourses (I use the asterisk in place of the masculine vowel). In order to elaborate the theoretical framework of such a critical feminist hermeneutics, it is necessary to delineate the key methodological components that are braided together in this theoretical articulation.

Since “voice,” positionality, and heterogeneity are key categories in feminist studies, feminist theory and the*logy have always insisted that scholarship cannot be done from a disembodied, value-neutral position. Research is always perspectival and socio-politically situated. Since they share this critique of positivist science with malestream hermeneutics, feminist religious studies and the*logy have found hermeneutical method and theory helpful. However, although hermeneutics appreciates tradition, it does not sufficiently consider the centuries of wo/men’s silencing and exclusion and the resulting systematically distorted communication.

Feminist hermeneutics has played a great part in this transformation of academic scholarship in religion. Nevertheless, even a cursory glance at the literature can show that the hermeneutical contributions of critical feminist scholarship are rarely recognized and much less acknowledged by white malestream academic and religious institutions. Feminist scholars are still compelled to “prove” the legitimacy and validity of their arguments by showing how these “fit” into the hermeneutical frameworks and epistemological theories of the “great men” in the field, despite decades of critical feminist work creating our own frameworks and epistemologies. The growing body of feminist research and publications seeks to address and redress centuries of wo/men’s silencing and exclusion from religious leadership and the*logical studies. Feminist studies in religion must, therefore, be

understood as critical research that explores the history of wo/men's subordination and exclusion. The starting point and interests of feminist hermeneutics differ from those of malestream hermeneutics, which is concerned with understanding, appreciating, and validating cultural and religious traditions. Feminist studies is instead closer to critical theory, rhetoric, and ideology critique than to universalizing, ontological hermeneutics. Nevertheless, critical hermeneutics is important for feminist inquiry, and it is necessary to critically explore and assess the contributions that critical hermeneutics, as a rhetoric of emancipation, makes to feminist studies in religion.

The notion of hermeneutics derives from the Greek word *hermeneuein* and means to interpret, exegete, explain, or translate. It owes its name to Hermes, the messenger of the gods, who has the task of mediating the announcements, declarations, and messages of the gods to mere mortals. His proclamations, however, are not just mere communication and mediation, but are also an explication of divine commands translated into human language so that they can be comprehended and obeyed. While hermeneutics can be understood with Derrida (1969) as a matter of the free play of signs and with Rorty (1979) as merely keeping the lines of communication open, according to Gadamer (1976), hermeneutics has the task of translating meaning from one "world" into another. Like Hermes, the messenger of the gods, hermeneutics not only communicates knowledge, but also instructs, directs, and enjoins. Hermeneutics thus has affinities with prophecy. It conveys revelation and interprets signs and oracles. It is a matter of practical understanding, which involves the Aristotelian virtue of *phronesis* (practical judgment and adjudication) which is not secured by an *a priori* method but only in the process of understanding.

As a discipline, philosophical hermeneutics is rooted in biblical interpretation. It is best understood as a theory and practice of interpretation that explores the conditions and possibilities of understanding not just texts but also other practices as well. As such, hermeneutics is not so much a disciplined scientific method or technique, as it is an epistemological perspective and approach. According to Brice R. Wachterhauser, it "represents not so much a highly honed, well-established theory of understanding or a long-standing, well-defined tradition of philosophy as it does a family of

concerns and critical perspectives.”¹⁰ Since Schleiermacher, Dilthey, and Gadamer, hermeneutics has maintained over and against scientific positivism that understanding takes place as a process of engagement in the hermeneutical circle or spiral, which is characterized by the part-whole relation. It stresses that understanding is not possible without preunderstandings or prejudices, and therefore that understanding is always contextually dependent. According to Wachterhauser, hermeneutics does not ground intelligibility in the “pregiven, essentially changeless human subject, but in the public sphere of evolving, linguistically mediated practice.”¹¹ Thus, hermeneutics seeks to remain open for change and difference.

Furthermore, hermeneutics insists on all knowledge as linguistically grounded, on its contextuality and its immersion in tradition. It stresses that human understanding can never take place without words and outside of time. Its key concepts are *empathy*, *historicity*, *linguisticity*, *tradition*, *preunderstanding*, *fusion of horizons*, and *the classic* with its notion of *effective history*. However, all seven theoretical emphases of hermeneutics are problematic from a critical feminist perspective because they do not sufficiently consider relations of domination and power.

Although I have introduced and shaped the field of feminist biblical hermeneutics, my own work has sought to articulate feminist studies in religion not simply as hermeneutical but as critical rhetorical studies. “Rhetorical” refers to a form of cultural practice and critical investigation that is no longer circumscribed by the scientific objectivism, liberalism, and nationalism of the Enlightenment, which relegated classical rhetoric to the dustbins of history. According to John Bender and David Wellbery, rhetoricality articulates the conditions of all discourses in the modern world and thus becomes a necessary basic category for any discursive action and exchange.¹² In a rhetorical research paradigm, method is also understood differently. Whereas in a scientific positivist paradigm, methods are understood as rules and regulations, in a critical-

¹⁰ Bruce R. Wachterhauser, *Hermeneutics and Modern Philosophy* (New York: SUNY Press, 1986), 5.

¹¹ Wachterhauser, *Hermeneutics and Modern Philosophy*, 8.

¹² John Bender and David E. Wellbery, “Rhetoricality: On the Modernist Return of Rhetoric,” in *The Ends of Rhetoric. History, Theory, Practice*, eds. John Bender and David E. Wellbery (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1990), 3–39, 25–26.

rhetorical paradigm, they are seen as modes of inquiry, as questions to be asked and perspectives to be clarified.

Because feminist theory has insisted that scholarship is not done from a disembodied value-neutral position or a “god’s eye view,” but that it is always perspectival and socio-politically situated, my own work has sought to articulate feminist theory and feminist studies in religion not just as hermeneutical, but rather as rhetorical-critical studies. Whereas the literary formalist and the historical positivist paradigms of interpretation still reigned in religious studies in the 1970s and 1980s, now epistemological and hermeneutical discussions that are critical of the positivist scientific paradigm of religious studies—such as critical race, postcolonial, cultural Latina/o, disability, or queer studies—determine academic discourses in religious studies from the closing decade of the twentieth century and through the early decades of the twenty-first century. Their theoretical and practical force has destabilized the foundations of the field of religious studies.

Feminist theory has shown that malestream scientific methods and theoretical perspectives have been formulated and shaped in the context of kyriarchal academic institutions that until very recently have been exclusive of wo/men and other “inferior status” scholars. Feminist studies in religion, therefore, cannot simply assume that academic research will produce knowledge which has the power to describe and analyze kyriarchal relations of domination accurately in order to change them. Hence, it must submit its methods to a critical process of rhetorical analysis and reconfiguration, a process of “braiding” or “blending together” various methods in order to serve liberatory goals. Such a braiding or hybridization of methods must be accomplished within a critical feminist framework: feminists assume that wo/men are as central to historical-cultural life as men are. If we want to articulate emancipatory and just relationships, we must modify the philosophical frameworks of argument. Thus, feminist theories have to engage in a critical hermeneutics that can analyze problems engendered by wo/men’s confrontation with injustices around the globe. In short, by “method” I do not mean primarily technical procedures and rules, but rather modes of critical reflection and analysis.

Critical feminist interpretation must be understood, therefore, not just in terms of hermeneutics but rather in terms of the overall context of critical theory and feminist theories of liberation and

religious principles of justice. As a theory and practice of justice, feminist critical studies cannot be limited to hermeneutical studies, which seek to understand, appreciate, and appropriate the texts and traditions of malestream culture and religion. Rather they must draw on and braid together several methodological approaches for reconfiguring hermeneutics as a *critical feminist rhetorics of liberation*. In short, feminist interpretation is best understood as a practice of rhetorical inquiry that engages in the formation of a critical historical and religious consciousness. Whereas hermeneutical theory seeks to understand and appreciate the meaning of texts, rhetorical interpretation and its the*-ethical interrogation of texts and symbolic worlds attend to the kinds of persuasive effects which religious discourses produce and how they produce them.

Understanding Critical Feminist Hermeneutic as Metic

In 2011, in my book *Transforming Vision: Explorations in Feminist The*ology*, I used the myth, not of Hermes, but of Metis and Athena to articulate the task of a critical feminist rhetoric:

Athena, the patron goddess of the classic Athenian city-state, was not only the patron of the arts, technological and scientific knowledge, but also a war goddess. According to Hesiod, she came fully-grown and armored from the head of her father Zeus. However, she only appears to be motherless. Her real mother is the goddess Metis, the “most wise wo/man among Gods and humans.”¹³

According to the myth, Zeus, the father of the gods, was in competition with Metis. He duped her when she was pregnant with Athena because he feared that Metis would bear a child who would surpass him in wisdom and power. Hence, he changed her into a fly. But this was not enough! Zeus swallowed the fly Metis wholesale in order to have her always with him and to benefit from her wise counsel. This mythical story of Metis and Zeus reveals not only the father of the god’s fear that the child of Wisdom would surpass him in knowledge, but it also lays open the conditions under which wo/men in kyriarchal cultures and religions are allowed to exercise wisdom and to produce knowledge. Read with a hermeneutics of suspicion, the myth of Metis and Athena shows that kyriarchal

¹³ Elizabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, *Transforming Vision: Explorations in Feminist The*ology* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2011), 69.

stories objectify wo/men and swallow them up in order to co-opt their wisdom and knowledge for their own interests of domination. Wo/men's or gender studies remain therefore ambiguous since they have wo/men or gender as objects of their research, rather than structures of domination. Critical feminist studies, in contrast, seeks to empower wo/men by recognizing and changing such knowledges and structures of marginalization and oppression.

Since the goal of a critical feminist historical hermeneutics is not simply to interpret and communicate meaning, but to undo kyriarchal mystification and verbal kyriocentrism of historical sources, it must derive its inspiration from Metis and not from Hermes, the trickster god. A feminist critical hermeneutic is, perhaps, best described as metic, it critically investigates how much mainstream religious myths, texts, traditions, and practices marginalize, make invisible or distort experience, tradition, language, knowledge, and wisdom such that they eliminate wo/men from cultural, historical and religious consciousness and texts. To unearth Metis, the history of wo/men's reality and wisdom, it is necessary to articulate a critical feminist method of historiography. If wo/men are people, then they are historical beings and members of their communities and societies. Hence, a critical feminist historical method needs to be able to tell history as the history of all people, whether male or female, enslaved or free, Christian or Jewish, Barbarian or Greek.

Critical Feminist Biblical Hermeneutics: Texts and Translations

Androcentric language received much attention during 1970-1980 in the US and during the last two decades in Europe,¹⁴ at a time when andro-kyriocentric language patterns and linguistic praxis came to consciousness, and they have been much debated as to their importance and function in how history is written. If history-writing is a language event and our sources for the writing of Early Christian beginnings are written in andro/kyriocentric language, and if archeological artefacts are explained and interpreted in andro-

¹⁴ See Robin Lakoff, *Language and Woman's Place* (New York: Harper & Row, 1975); Mary Ritchie Key, *Male/Female Language: With a Comprehensive Bibliography* (Metuchen, N.J.: Scarecrow Press, 1975); Nancy Henley and Barrie Thorne, *She Said/He Said* (Pittsburgh: KNOW, 1975); Wendy Martyna, "Beyond the 'He/Man' Approach: The Case for Non-Sexist Language," *Signs* 5 (1980): 482-93. See the review article in *Feminist Biblical Interpretation in the 20th Century*.

kyriocentric language, scholars are confronted with the problem of historically appropriate and philologically correct translation. The problem becomes even more complex when biblical texts are translated into non-androcentric languages.¹⁵ In a social-cultural context where masculine biased language is no longer understood as generic language but as sexist-exclusive language, the translator must evaluate whether the andro/kyriocentric text means natural masculine gender or whether such a genderization and sexualization of the generic andro/kyriocentric text is against the meaning-intention of the text and its historical contexts.

While the appropriate translation of masculine metaphors and kyrio/androcentric language remains a difficult task, another aspect of andro/kyriocentric language of historical source-texts is not just important for contemporary translations, but has great ramifications for our understanding of texts as historical sources. A *historically adequate* translation must take into account the interpretative implications of andro-kyriocentric language which functioned as inclusive language in a kyriarchal culture. Such androcentric inclusive language mentions wo/men only when their presence has become in any way a problem or when they are "exceptional" or in greetings, but it does not mention wo/men in so-called normal situations. For instance, even today, the minutes of a scholarly conference read, "Professor so and so, . . . he said, . . .," although women scholars might have been present at the conference. Only if a woman is exceptional or makes a presentation might the minutes identify her as a woman. Moreover, even women politicians, scholars, or writers still refer to themselves as chairmen. In short, andro-kyriocentric language is inclusive of women but does not mention them explicitly.

Scholars understand and interpret such andro/kyriocentric language in a twofold way: either as generic or as gender specific. Although scholars generally no longer refuse to translate the Pauline address "brothers" with "brothers and sisters," they nevertheless assume that the Christian communities to whom Paul wrote were led by men. Since they do not want to claim that early Christianity was a male cult like the Mithras cult, scholars understand grammatically masculine terms such as *elect, saints, brothers, or sons*

¹⁵ See Satoko Yamaguchi, "Father Image of G*d and Inclusive Language," in *Toward a new Heaven and Earth: Essays in Honor of Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza*, ed. Fernando Segovia (Maryknoll: Orbis, 2003) 199-224.

as generic language designating men and wo/men. Such grammatically male designations apply to all members of the Christian community. Grammatically masculine language *with respect to community membership* is no longer understood in a gender specific but in an inclusive generic way.

However, whenever scholars discuss leadership titles—for example, apostles, prophets, or teachers—they *eo ipso* assume that these terms apply only to men despite clear instances in the text that such grammatically masculine titles were also used for wo/men. For instance, Rom 16:1 characterizes Phoebe with the grammatically masculine form of the Greek term *diakonos* and Tit 2:3 uses the grammatically masculine title *kalodidaskalos* for wo/men. If scholars would take seriously the issue of andro/kyriocentric language as generic language, we would maintain that any interpretation and translation claiming to be historically adequate to the language character of its sources must understand and translate New Testament androcentric language on the whole as inclusive of women until proven otherwise. The passages of the New Testament that directly mention women do so because such women were exceptional or their actions had become a problem. These texts must not be taken to be all the available information on women in early Christianity. Thus, we no longer can simply assume that only 1 Cor 11:2-16 speaks about women prophets, while the rest of chapters 11-14 refer to male charismatics and to male prophets. The opposite is the case. In 1 Cor 11-14 Paul speaks about the worship of all Christians, men and women, and he singles out women in 11:2-16 only because their behavior constituted a special problem. Therefore, a historically adequate translation and interpretation must not only take the inclusive function of andro/kyriocentric language into account, but also acknowledge the limitations of such language.

Because contemporary scholars understand andro/kyriocentric language as descriptive of historical reality and share in the androcentric-kyriarchal mind-set of Western culture, they cannot do justice to texts that speak positively about wo/men or integrate these texts into their re-constructive, often unreflected, models of early Christian history. As they generally presuppose that men, and not wo/men, developed religious leadership as apostles, they are still interpreted in terms of an andro-kyriocentric perspective. For example, interpreters assume that Rom 16:7 speaks about two men,

Andronicus and Junianus, who had already become Christians before Paul and had great authority as apostles. However, there is no reason to understand the Greek Junian as a shortened form of the male name Junianus since Junia was a well-known female name. Even *Patristic* exegesis understood the Greek accusative *Junian* as the name of a woman. Andronicus and Junia were an influential missionary team who were acknowledged as apostles.¹⁶

Critical Feminist Biblical Hermeneutical Models of Historical Reconstruction

Critical feminist interpretation pays especially close attention to the function of kyriocentric biblical language that derives its oppressive as well as its critical revelatory "power" from its cultural-religious contexts.¹⁷ Texts do not have an essential unchangeable meaning, but they always construct meaning in context. To do so, it needs a rhetorical communicative understanding of language and text that can conceptualize wo/men as historical agents. However, reading such stories in a cultural-religious contexts that places emphasis on the maleness and lordship of G*d¹⁸ and Jesus reinforces wo/men's cultural elite male identification and subordinate subject-location. Such readings shape Christian identity not only as elite male identity, but also as an identity molded by domination and exclusion. This comes particularly to the fore in the persistent traces of anti-Judaism that pop up even in Christian feminist writings

¹⁶ See my article "Die Rolle der Frau in der urchristlichen Bewegung," *Concilium* 12 (1976): 3–9, in which I pointed to M. J. Lagrange's decision in favor of a woman (*Saint Paul, Épître aux-Romains* [Paris, 1916], p. 366), although this textual reading was abandoned by Protestant exegesis. Bernadette Brooten explored this reference with respect to the history of interpretation in "Junia . . . Outstanding among the Apostles," in *Woman Priests: A Catholic Commentary on the Vatican Declaration*, eds. L. and A. Swidler (New York: Paulist Press, 1977), 141–44. Eldon Jay Epp, *Junia The First Woman Apostle* (Fortress, 2005).

¹⁷ For the problem of translating grammatically gendered languages such as Greek or English into a non-gendered language system, see the very interesting article by Satoko Yamaguchi, "Father Image of G*d and Inclusive Language: A Reflection in Japan," in *Toward a New Heaven and a New Earth: Essays in Honor of Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza*, ed. Fernando F. Segovia (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 2003), 199–224. I hope that this article will engender more research on biblical translation and interpretation in non-androcentric language contexts.

¹⁸ See the still very useful book by Brian Wren, *What Language Shall I Borrow? God-Talk in Worship: A Male Response to Feminist Theology* (New York: Crossroad, 1989).

despite all efforts to eliminate anti-Judaism.¹⁹ Thus, in the act of reading Scripture, wo/men not only suffer from the alienating division of self against self and wo/men against wo/men, but also from the realization that to be fe/male means never to be "a son of God" and to be excluded from the divine power of the "master/lord/father/husband."

Such a cultural-religious elite male identification or kyriarchal "immasculation"²⁰ that is produced by kyriocentric language and culture, however, is never total because of wo/men's conflicting position within at least two contradictory discourses offered by society and biblical religions. Wo/men participate at one and the same time both in the specifically "feminine" cultural discourse of submission, inadequacy, inferiority, dependency, and irrational intuition, *and* in the generic "masculine-human" discourse of subjectivity, self-determination, freedom, justice, and equality. Similarly, Christian wo/men participate at one and the same time both in the biblical discourse of subordination and prejudice as well as in that of the discipleship of equals. If such a cultural and religious alternative discursive location becomes conscious, it allows the feminist interpreter to become a reader resisting the persuasive power of the kyriocentric biblical text.

When wo/men recognize our contradictory ideological position in a grammatically kyriocentric language system, we can become readers resisting the *lord-master-elite male-identification* of the androcentric, racist, heterosexist, classist, or colonialist text. However, if this contradiction is not brought into consciousness, it cannot be exploited for change and rather leads to further self-alienation. For change to take place, subordinated people must concretely and explicitly claim as their very own, the human values and democratic visions that the kyriocentric text reserves solely for elite, educated, and propertied men.

¹⁹ See my discussion of anti-Judaism in *Feminist Interpretation in Jesus and the Politics of Interpretation* (New York: Continuum, 2000), 115-144; Amy Jill Levine, "Lillies of the Field and Wandering Jews: Biblical Scholarship, Wo/men's Roles, and Social Location," in *Transformative Encounters. Jesus and Wo/men Re-Viewed*, ed. Ingrid Rosa Kitzberger (Leiden: Brill, 2000), 328-352; and the Roundtable Discussion, "Anti-Judaism and Postcolonial Biblical Interpretation," *JFSR* 20/1 (2004).

²⁰ Judith Fetterly, *The Resisting Reader: A Feminist Approach to American Fiction* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1978), xx.

Insofar as modern "democratic" discourses have been constituted as kyriarchal malestream discourses, the equality, justice, and freedom about which they speak have been only partially realized in religion, society, and culture. These partial realizations, which have left their traces in kyriocentric texts, therefore have to be reconstructed and imagined differently. A reconstructive "imagination," however, is not pure fantasy, but historical-religious imagination because it refers to a reality that has been already partially accomplished in the emancipatory struggles of those who have been subordinated and subjugated throughout the centuries.

Recognizing the kyriocentric dynamics of biblical texts and their function in wo/men's lives, a critical feminist interpretation is best understood as a rhetorics of inquiry²¹ and as a broad interpretative practice which entails epistemological-ideological reflection and socio-cultural analysis of power relations. In distinction to a hermeneutic-aesthetic inquiry which strives for textual understanding, appreciation, application, and consent, a critical hermeneutic-rhetorical feminist inquiry pays attention to the power structures and interests that shape language, text, and understanding. It is concerned not just with exploring the conditions and possibilities of understanding and with appreciating kyriarchal biblical texts, but also with the problem as to how one can critically assess and dismantle their power of persuasion in the interest of wo/men's well-being. Therefore, a feminist rhetorical inquiry challenges the dominant model of interpretation which divides interpretation either into three discrete stages as reading behind the text, as reading the text, and as reading in front of the text; separates it into the three discrete operations of explanation, understanding, and application; or constructs a dualistic opposition between so-called scientific and engaged scholarship dedicated to application.

A critical feminist interpretation for liberation argues instead for the integrity and indivisibility of the interpretive process as well as the primacy of the contemporary starting point of reading. Not only feminist, but malestream biblical interpreters also read in front of the influential cultural classic or religious canonical text. Cultural classics and canonical scriptures in turn already inform our

²¹ For my theoretical argument and its exemplification on Pauline texts, see my book *Rhetoric and Ethic: The Politics of Biblical Studies* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1999).

readings. Insofar as they are cultural or religious “classics,” they have “performative authority” that is a continuing significance and influence in shaping people’s thought and life. They function as persuasive rhetorical texts that continue to influence western cultures and biblical religions.

In conclusion, a critical feminist interpretation for liberation operates not only with a different understanding of texts, but also with close textual readings that are different from mainstream hermeneutics. Whereas a literary reading focuses on the ideologies inscribed in biblical texts and generally rejects a systemic analysis of the multiplicative historical structures of domination and their impact on texts and readers as the “master story,” a critical rhetorical analysis of biblical texts remains anchored in a systemic analysis of particular historical rhetorical situations and socio-political contexts. Hence, with Kwok Pui-lan I continue to insist on the importance of reclaiming subjugated knowledges as memory and heritage for feminist liberation struggles today, captured in the braiding of rhetoric, analyses, contexts, and methods into a Critical Feminist Biblical Hermeneutics of Liberation.²² And to close my Festschrift article with the traditional academic expression of good wishes, I add: “*Ad multos annos*, Pui-lan! Sorry, that I am not able to say and write these good wishes in Chinese!”

²² Severino Croatto, *Biblical Hermeneutics: Toward a Theory of Reading as the Production of Meaning* (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1987), 80: "the hermeneutics of a text is conditioned by the text itself. The text indicates the limits (however broad) of its own meaning. A text says what it permits to be said. Its polysemy arises from its previous closure. Hence, the urgency of situating it in its proper context, by means of historical-critical methods, and of exploring its capacity for the production of meaning (according to the laws of semiotics), in order thus to cause its 'forward' to blossom from within life."

From Doctrinal Exclusivism to Religious Pluralism:
Kwok Pui-lan's Theology of Religious Difference

Peter C. Phan

This essay in honor of Kwok Pui-lan examines her theology of religious pluralism in the context of Asian, and more narrowly, Asian-American theology. The hyphenated nomenclature “Asian-American theology” intimates its double characteristics. On the one hand, as *Asian*, it is deeply rooted in Asian realities such as Asia’s multiple and diverse histories, cultures, and religions that form the context and resources for Asian theology. On the other hand, as *American* theology, it is elaborated in North America and must take into account its distinctive challenges and opportunities.¹ Thus, an evaluation of Asian-American theology must assess how deeply it is rooted in and how well it makes use of the sources and resources of both the Asian and American contexts.²

¹ On Kwok Pui-lan’s understanding of the relation between “Asian” and “Asian American” feminist theology in the context of transnationalism, see her essay “Fishing the Asia Pacific: Transnationalism and Feminist Theology,” in *Off the Menu: Asian and Asian North American Women’s Religion and Theology*, eds. Rita Nakashima Brock, Jung Ha Kim, Kwok Pui-lan, and Seung Ai Yang (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2007), 3–22.

² In this essay I limit my consideration to Asian-American theologians. Note that here when “Asian-American” is used as an adjective, it is hyphenated, but not hyphenated when it is used as a substantive, either as “Asian Americans” or “American Asians.” This is only an orthographic choice and prescinds from the much-debated issue of whether the hyphen should be used or not in describing the ethnic and socio-political identity of Asians in the US. Since 1992, May is designated as the Asian-American and Pacific Islander Heritage Month. In 1997, “Asian” is distinguished from “Native Hawaiians and Other Pacific Islanders” as two different racial categories. By “Asia” is meant here South Asia, Northeast Asia, and Southeast Asia. For helpful histories of Asian Americans, see Ronald Takaki, *Strangers from a Different Shore: A History of Asian Americans* (New York, Penguin Books, 1989); Gary Y. Okihito, *The Columbia Guide to Asian American History* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2001); and Erika Lee, *The Making of Asian America: A History* (New

By way of introduction, I begin with a very brief summary of the development of Asian theologies of religions, which may be characterized as a movement from doctrinal exclusivism to religious pluralism, a shift that has been mirrored, I submit, in Asian-American theology of religions. Next, I expound Kwok Pui-lan's theology of religions, with special attention to its stages of development. The concluding part outlines an Asian-American theology of religious pluralism.

Asian Theology of Religion: From Doctrinal Exclusivism to Religious Pluralism

Contrary to popular opinion, Asian Christian theology is no newcomer to the theological scene, with few works to its credit compared with, let's say, Western theology which is alleged to be universally valid, with numerous classics and world-renowned theologians. This widespread misjudgment is quickly dismantled by taking a look at the massive three-volume bibliographical overview of Asian theologies.³

Religious Diversity in Early Missionaries to Asia

Asian systematic theologians—leaving aside specialists in the Bible, church history, theological ethics, and pastoral theology—have of course dealt with all the *loci theologici* of the Christian faith. Without a doubt, however, and differently from their colleagues in Europe, North America, and Latin America, Asian theologians have from the very beginning devoted much attention and energy to the

York: Simon & Shuster, 2015). For a discussion of the Asian-American identity, see David Palumbo-Liu, *Asian/American: Historical Crossings of a Racial Frontier* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1999) and Min Zhou and J. V. Gatewood, eds., *Contemporary Asian America: A Multidisciplinary Reader*, second edition (New York: New York University Press, 2007). For a study of the religions of Asian Americans, see Tony Carnes and Fenggang Yang, eds., *Asian American Religions: The Making and Remaking of Borders and Boundaries* (New York: New York University Press, 2004). For a discussion of Asian-American studies, see Kent A. Ono, ed., *A Companion to Asian American Studies* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2005) and Jean Yu-wen Shen Wu and Thomas C. Chen, eds., *Asian American Studies Now: A Critical Reader* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2010).

³ See John C. England et al., *Asian Christian Theologies: A Research Guide to Authors, Movements, Sources. Volume 1: Asia Region, South Asia, Austral Asia. Volume 2: Southeast Asia. Volume 3: Northeast Asia* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 2002), a total of 2,131 pages!

issue of religious diversity. This is mainly because Christianity is a minority religion in Asia and therefore requires a dialogue between Christians and the followers of other religions to show how the Christian message, especially regarding God, Christ, Holy Spirit, church, and salvation, can be expressed in terms that are understandable to non-Christians.

This theological task, now known as inculturation, indigenization, or contextualization, was undertaken by the very first Christian missionaries of the Church of the East in China, as demonstrated by the so-called Nestorian Stele, which was erected in 781 and discovered in 1623 or 1625. The text of the stele, consisting of about 1,900 Chinese characters and fifty Syriac words, composed by Jingjing, a priest of the Church of the East, whose Syriac name is Adam, is made up of three parts: the first, an exposition of the basic Christian beliefs and practices, the second, a history of the first 146 years of Syrian Christianity in China, and the third, a summary of the first two parts in a poem.

The most relevant part of the text for our theme is the first, in which the teachings of Christianity, called the Luminous Religion (*Jingjiao*) from the *Daqin*, a Chinese term for Syria or the Roman Empire, are formulated in terms borrowed from three Chinese religious traditions, namely, Buddhism, Confucianism, and Daoism. The text calls God “Veritable Mystery” and makes use of Buddhist, Daoist, and to a lesser extent, Confucian thought-forms and vocabularies to expound the Christian doctrines of creation, the Trinity, the Incarnation, the Cross, and baptism. This is the first attempt at interreligious dialogue that shows a willingness to acknowledge the existence of other religions and the necessity of learning from them.⁴

⁴ On the Church of the East in China and the stele, see P. Yoshio Saeki, *The Nestorian Monument in China* (London: Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge, 1913); R. Todd Goodwin, *Persian Christians at the Chinese Court: The Xi’an Stele and the Early Medieval Church of the East* (London: L. B. Tauris, 2018); and Martin Palmer, *The Jesus Sutras: Rediscovering the Lost Scrolls of Taoist Christianity* (New York: Ballantine, 2001). In 1900, a great number of writings, both religious and secular, dating from the late fourth to early eleventh centuries, were discovered in the Mogao Caves of Dunhuang. Among Christian manuscripts, four are attributed to Alopen, the leader of the group of missionaries of the Church of the East to China, in particular the *Jesus-Messiah Sutra*, possibly written by Alopen shortly after his arrival in Chang’an (Xi’an), to explain the Christian doctrines to the emperor Taizong.

This task of inculturation was carried out further by Jesuit missionaries to Asia, the most celebrated among whom were Matteo Ricci in China during the Ming Dynasty,⁵ Alexandre de Rhodes in Vietnam,⁶ and Roberto de Nobili in South India.⁷ Impressive as the writings of these missionaries and countless others are, which demonstrate high respect for Confucianism and Hinduism – but not for Buddhism and Daoism—they were by no means attempts at interreligious dialogue as it is understood today. Their authors were essentially motivated by concerns about Christian mission and conversion. They used the Christian faith and way of life, which were believed to be superior to all, as the criterion and standard to evaluate other religions, and these are accepted only to the extent that they agree with or buttress Christian beliefs and ethics. Of course, beliefs and practices of other religions that were judged to be superstition and paganism were roundly rejected. A typical example is the so-called Chinese Rites Controversy in which the cult of ancestors was repeatedly condemned.⁸ In sum, it was firmly held that Christ is the only and universal Savior and that outside the Church there is no salvation. There was no acknowledgment that religions other than Christianity can lead to full human flourishing or salvation.

From Exclusivism to Inclusivism

To put it in terms of contemporary theologies of religions, these writings espouse the exclusivist position, though they do at times contain hints of the inclusivist position by recognizing the existence of elements of truth and goodness in Confucianism (Ricci and de Rhodes) and Hinduism (de Nobili).⁹ The exclusivist position was most strongly defended by the Dutch missiologist Hendrik Kraemer

⁵ See in particular Matteo Ricci, *The True Meaning of the Lord of Heaven*, trans. Douglas Lancashire and Peter Hu Kuo-chen (Taipei: Ricci Institute, 1985).

⁶ See Peter C. Phan, *Mission and Catechesis: Alexandre de Rhodes and Inculturation in Seventeenth-Century Vietnam* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1984).

⁷ See Roberto de Nobili, *Preaching Wisdom to the Wise: Three Treatises* (St. Louis, MI: Institute of Jesuit Sources, 2000).

⁸ See George Minamiki, *The Chinese Rites Controversy: From Its Beginning to Modern Times* (Chicago: Loyola University Press, 1985) and David E. Mungello, ed., *The Chinese Rites Controversy: Its History and Meaning* (London: Routledge, 1994).

⁹ The three paradigms of the contemporary theology of religion—exclusivism, inclusivism, and pluralism—will be discussed at greater length below when expounding the theology of religion of Kwok Pui-lan.

(1888-1965) at the World Mission Conference in Tambaram, near Madras (Chennai), in 1938. Kraemer argued that the gap created by sin between God and humanity can be bridged by God alone, and thus religions are nothing more than vain human attempts to reach God and have no salvific value in themselves. God has reached out to humans in Jesus Christ and offered them salvation, which is now available only in Christianity. Furthermore, Kraemer held that all religions constitute coherent wholes made up of beliefs, values, and practices that are inextricably interrelated and therefore are incomprehensible apart from each other. This organic unity of religions makes interreligious dialogue impossible if it intends to search for “points of contact” between them and Christianity apart from their other elements.¹⁰

Ironically, it was Kraemer’s defense of the exclusivist theology of religions that propelled the shift from doctrinal exclusivism to religious pluralism in Asia. Opponents to Kraemaer’s negative evaluation of religions at the Tambaram conference, such as Herbert H. Farmer, Zhao Zichen (T. C. Chao), David G. Moses, Karl L. Reichelt, and Alfred G. Hogg, criticized his failure to understand Asian religions in their particularities, especially their followers’ awareness of a deity as a supreme being that makes an absolute demand on them, and to do justice to the religious life of the people of other religions.¹¹ Thus, the “Tambaram Controversy” opened the door to the development of a pluralistic theology of religions.¹²

Such a theological shift was gradual. Even before the Tambaram conference, there had been a move from exclusivism to inclusivism at the World Missionary Conference held at Edinburgh in 1910. Several Asian participants at this conference, such as Cheng Jingyi from China, Harada Tasuku and Honda Matsu from Japan, and Venadayagam S. Azariah and Kali C. Chatterjee from India, had

¹⁰ See Hendrik Kraemer, *The Christian Message in a Non-Christian World* (New York: Harper, 1938).

¹¹ For the proceedings of the Tambaram World Mission Conference, which contains the views of Hendrik Kraemer and his critics, see International Missionary Council, *The Authority of the Faith* (New York: International Missionary Council, 1939).

¹² On this development, see S. Wesley Ariarajah, “Changing Paradigms of Asian Christian Attitude to Other Religions,” in *The Oxford Handbook of Christianity in Asia*, ed. Felix Wilfred (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), 347–367.

called for a more respectful approach to other religions.¹³ A notable representative of the inclusivist position, which holds that Christianity fulfills all other religions, was John Nicol Farquhar (1861-1929), who called Christ the “Crown of Hinduism.” At the Second Vatican Council (1962-1965), Karl Rahner (1904-1984) and others helped the Catholic Church move away from its centuries-long exclusivist Christology and ecclesiology toward an inclusivist position that acknowledges the existence of “elements of truth and grace” in other religions while maintaining the universality and uniqueness of Christ as the Savior and the necessity of the church as the sacrament of salvation.¹⁴ The majority of Asian Catholic theologians in the post-Vatican II era would subscribe to this inclusivist teaching.

Contemporary Asian Theologies of Religions

In the current Asian theologies of religions and the practice of interreligious dialogue, there are three major trends. The first focuses on the spiritual-contemplative dimension of the Asian religious traditions and promotes an interreligious sharing of their spiritual riches, especially in ashrams and spiritual centers.¹⁵ The

¹³ For a study of the attitude of missionaries and theologians toward non-Christians before and during the Edinburgh Conference, see Kenneth Crackwell, *Justice, Courtesy and Love: Theologians and Missionaries Encountering World Religions, 1846-1914* (London: Epworth Press, 1995).

¹⁴ Vatican II's most important document of the church's relations to non-Christian religions is *Nostra Aetate*. Its inclusivist theology of religions is best summarized in the following statement: “The Catholic Church rejects nothing of what is true and holy in these religions. It has a high regard for the manner of life and conduct, the precepts and doctrines which, although differing in many ways from its own teachings, nevertheless often reflect a ray of that truth which enlightens all men and women. Yet it proclaims and is in duty bound to proclaim without fail, Christ who is the way, the truth and the life (Jn. 1:6). In him, in whom God reconciled all things to himself (see 2 Cor. 5:18-19), people find the fullness of their religious life” (*Nostra Aetate*, no. 2). The English translation is taken from *Vatican II: The Basic Sixteen Documents*, gen. ed. Austin Flannery (Northport, NY: Costello Pub. Co., 2007), 570-571.

¹⁵ Representatives of this first trend include: from India: Swami Abhishikanada (Henri Le Saux), Swami Parama Arubi Anandam (Jules Monchanin), Bede Griffith, Swami Amalorananda (D. S. Amalorpavadass), Vandana Mataji, and Sara Grant. From Sri Lanka: D. T. Niles, Lynn A. de Silva, Michael Rodrigo, and Lakshman Wickremesinghe. From the Philippines: Anscar Chupungco, Mary John Manazan, and José M. de Mesa. From mainland China: Vincent Lebbe, Lou Tseng-tsiang, Wang Mingdao, and Ni Tuosheng (Watchman Nee). From Hong Kong: Peter Lee

second trend focuses on the philosophical-religious traditions of various religions and develops an interreligious understanding of a particular doctrine of a religious tradition through that of another.¹⁶ The third trend highlights the socio-political message of freedom inherent in the Gospel and other religious traditions and promotes collaboration among the followers of all religions to achieve the liberation of all peoples from the structures of injustice and oppression, be it race, ethnicity, class, caste, gender, sexual orientation, political affiliation, religion, and other markers.¹⁷ Out of this third trend, several theologies have emerged, notably Dalit theology and Tribal/Adavasi theology in India, *minjung* theology in Korea, homeland theology in Taiwan, theology of struggle in the Philippines, and feminist and ecological theologies in almost all Asian countries.

Among the many socio-political and economic issues that have been of concern to Asian theologians, colonialism and its attendant ideology, namely, imperialism, have stood out, especially in Asian

King-hung (Li Jingxiong), Cardinal John Tong, Edward Chau, and Maria Goretti Lau (Lau Choi-mei). From Taiwan: Aloysius Chang Ch'unshen, Mark Chih-jung Fang, and Luis Gutheinz. From Korea: Choi Byung Hyun, Cardinal Stephen Kim Su Hwan, and Ham Sok Hon. From Japan: Nijima Jo (Joseph Hardy Neesima), Kagawa Toyohiko, Kitamori Kazoh, and Inoue Yoji.

¹⁶ Notable exponents of this second trend include: From India: Raimon Panikkar, Stanley Samartha, and Kalarikkal P. Aleaz. From Sri Lanka: Daniel T. Niles and Antony Fernando. From the Philippines: Leonardo Mercado, Francisco Claver, and Mario Francisco. From mainland China: Wu Ching-hsiung, Ding Guangxun, and Wang Weifan. From Hong Kong: Archie Lee Chi-chung (Li Zhiiang), Liu Xiaofeng, and Madeleine Kwong Lay-kuen. From Taiwan: Shoki Coe (N Chiong Hui/Hwang Chang-hue) and Benoit Vermander. From Korea: Yun Sung Bum and Yu Dong Shik. From Japan: Uchimura Kanzo, Hugo Enomiya-Lasalle, Heinrich Dumoulin, and Furuya Yasuo.

¹⁷ Representatives of this third trend include: From India: M. M. Thomas, Sebastian Kappen, Samuel Ryan, Jessie Tellis-Nayak, Astrid Lobno Gaiwala, Michael Amaladoss, Nirmal Minz, George Nijan, Felix Sugirtharaj, Arvind P. Nirmal, Felix Wilfed, and Aruna Gnanadason. From Sri Lanka: Tissa Balasuriya, Aloysius Pieris, Paul Caspersz, and R.S. Sugirtharajah. From the Philippines: Virginia Fabella, Edicio de la Torre, Carlos Abesamis, Eleazar Fernandez, Vitaliano Garospe, Elizabeth Tapia, and Agnes Brazal. From Hong Kong: Angela Wong Wai-ching (Huang Huizhen) and Kwan Sui-man (Guan Ruiwen). From Taiwan: Choan-seng Song and Huang Po-ho. From Korea: Anselm Min Kyong Suk, Kim Chi Ha (Kim Hyung), Kim Jae Joon, Suh Nam Dong, Ahn Byung Mu, Hyun Young Hak, David Suh Kwang Sun, Kim Yong Bok, Lee Park Sun Ai, and Kang Nam Soon. From Japan: Doi Masaoshi, Joseph John Spae, Johannes Kadowaki Kakichi, Jan van Bragt, Koyama Kosuke, and Seiichi Yagi.

countries that have been subjected to colonialism. Past colonial and imperialist powers that have occupied Asian countries include Spain (the Philippines), Portugal (Macau, Indonesia, and Timor), Britain (India, Sri Lanka, Hong Kong, Malaysia, Burma, and Singapore), Holland (Indonesia), France (Vietnam, Cambodia, and Laos), Japan (Korea), and the US (the Philippines).¹⁸ Even countries that have not been colonized have suffered economically and militarily at the hands of European and American imperialist powers; for instance, China (the Unequal Treaties) and Japan (the forced opening of the country to Western commerce and the atomic bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki). This experience of colonization has given rise to Asian subaltern, postcolonial, and post-imperialist studies which investigate the different ways in which the “non-elites,” who have been silenced by Western imperialist colonial powers, made their voices heard by creating social, political, and cultural movements and using local knowledge to disassemble, contest, and oppose their colonizers’ claim to power, and thus establish their own alternative anti-colonial futures.¹⁹

It is in the context of the third trend of Asian theologies of religions and the practice of interreligious dialogue, as expounded above, and postcolonial and post-imperialist theologies that Kwok Pui-lan’s theology of religions can be best placed and understood. Of course, placing Kwok’s theology in the third trend of Asian theology of religion is not intended to deny that it has both spiritual and philosophical-religious dimensions. The purpose is simply to highlight the fact that feminism and postcolonial thought have played a predominantly determinative role in the development of Kwok’s theology and its methodology.

¹⁸ On the colonization of Asian countries and its entanglements with Christian missions, see Julius Bautista, “Christianity in Southeast Asia: Colonialism, Nationalism and the Caveats of Conversion,” in *The Oxford Handbook of Christianity in Asia*, ed. Felix Wilfred (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), 215–230.

¹⁹ On subaltern and post-imperialistic studies, see the “Subaltern Studies Group” or “Subaltern Studies Collective,” among whom Rahajit Guha has been influential. Major postcolonial theorists include Frantz Fanon, Edward Said, Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, and Homi K. Bhabha. Despite their differences, proponents of post-imperialistic and postcolonial theories share a fundamental claim, namely, that the contemporary world cannot be understood except in relationship to the history of imperialism and colonial rule.

Kwok Pui-lan's Theology of Religious Difference

Rarely are doctoral dissertations reliable prognosticators of their authors' future intellectual trajectory. Most often the newly-minted Ph.Ds would seek to publish their revised dissertations, shorn of their thick forest of footnotes and turgid style, to carve out their academic niche and to achieve tenure. But more often than not, established scholars will move far away from their initial narrow field of academic interest to different, albeit germane, themes in their subsequent research.

From History to Feminist and Postcolonial Thought

This is true of Kwok Pui-lan. In her dissertation, she draws on a wide variety of archival material to reconstruct the life of Chinese women in the church. Compared to their Chinese sisters, Christian women had more prolonged exposure to Western civilization through the Christian Church, mission schools, and Christian benevolence. Kwok Pui-lan shows how Chinese women reacted to foreign influences, Christianity in particular, and in this way broadens our understanding of how Christianity adapts to and functions in the new Chinese cultural context.²⁰ Kwok's largely historical dissertation, however, contains fecund seeds for her later biblical hermeneutics and systematic theology which explore the impact of feminism and postcolonial and post-imperialist thought on biblical interpretation and the theology of religions. In the Augustinian-style *retractatio* of her first book, Kwok writes:

In my first book, *Chinese Women and Christianity, 1860-1927*, I painstakingly reconstructed Chinese women as actors, writers, and social reformers in the unfolding drama of the Christian movement at the turn of the twentieth century. As I look back at my work, I wish I had had more exchanges with non-Western scholars who were probing the houses of memory of their foremothers, for I have learned much from Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham's work on the women's movement in the Black Baptist Church and Leila Ahmed's book on women and gender in Islam. I would also have benefited from the scholarship by historians and

²⁰ See Kwok Pui-lan, *Chinese Women and Christianity, 1860-1927* (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1992).

anthropologists who investigated the relationship among race, gender, and imperial power.²¹

From this reevaluation of her dissertation it is clear that Kwok intended to bring together in her future research three areas of scholarly investigation that up to her writing of *Postcolonial Imagination and Feminist Theology* had been kept apart: feminism (“gender”), postcolonialism (“race” and “imperial power”), and studies of non-Christian religions (“Islam”). It is in the cross-fertilization of these three areas of studies that Kwok will formulate her theology of non-Christian religions. It is here that Kwok joins the rank of those Asian theologians, indeed as a preeminent member, who make use of postcolonial thought to highlight the socio-political message of liberation inherent in the Gospel and other religious traditions, and promote collaboration among the followers of all religions to achieve the liberation of all people, especially women, from the structures of injustice and oppression. In what follows I will detail the stages through which Kwok developed her theology of religions, not as abandonment and reversal of her earlier positions but rather as a gradual explication and elaboration of the overarching insights that lie at the foundation of her theology.

From Western-Biblical Hermeneutics to Asian Hermeneutics: A “Dialogical Model of Interpretation”

Kwok’s next single-authored book after her dissertation explores at length how this cross-fertilization bears upon biblical interpretation in the non-Biblical world and our understanding of non-Christian religions. She revealed that she had given much thought to choosing the title of her book *Discovering the Bible in the Non-Biblical World*.²² “Discovering,” borrowed from the title of Paul A. Cohen’s book *Discovering History in China*, signals that a new method of interpreting the Bible is urgently needed in Asia, one that is not western-centric, contrary to the way Chinese history had recently been studied, but Asia-centered.²³ The focus is on the

²¹ Kwok Pui-lan, *Postcolonial Imagination and Feminist Theology* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2005), 32–33.

²² Kwok Pui-lan, *Discovering the Bible in the Non-Biblical World* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 1995). This was the title of her early essay in *Semeia* 47 (1989): 25–43.

²³ Paul A. Cohen, *Discovering History in China: American Historical Writings on the Recent Chinese Past* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1984).

“Bible,” which is an essential part of the colonial discourse, has been used to legitimize the colonizers’ belief in the inferiority of the Asian peoples and the deficiency of Asian cultures. At the same time, however, the Bible has also served as a spiritual and theological resource for Asian Christians struggling against oppression. “Non-Biblical World” stands for Asia with its non-Christian population constituting the overwhelming majority. Discovering the Bible in the non-Christian world must necessarily deal with religious diversity and formulate a theology of religions.

Kwok acknowledges that until recently, most of the Asian women biblical scholars, herself included, have made extensive use of the writings of Western women scholars such as Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, Phyllis Trible, and Rosemary Radford Ruether. Now, however, she believes it is time to move from Western-biblical hermeneutics to Asian-feminist hermeneutics. This hermeneutical move requires a new approach, which Kwok calls a “dialogical model of interpretation.” She gives a concise description of it:

A dialogical model takes into consideration not only the written text but also oral discussion of the text in different social dialects. It invites more dialogical partners by shifting the emphasis from one scripture (the Bible) to many scriptures, from responding to one religious narrative to many possible narratives. It shifts from a single-axis framework of analysis to multiaxial interpretation, taking into serious consideration the issues of race, class, gender, culture, and history. It emphasizes the democratizing of the interpretative process, calling attention to the construction of meanings by marginalized people, to the opening up of interpretive space for other voices, and to the creation of a more inclusive and just community.²⁴

Several elements of this dialogical model of interpretation need highlighting in our effort to understand Kwok’s theology of religions. Here, I will draw on Kwok’s magnum opus, *Postcolonial Imagination and Feminist Theology*, to fill out what she wrote earlier in *Discovering the Bible in the Non-Biblical World*. What is central in Kwok’s biblical hermeneutics is her emphasis and focus on the *intersections* among text, orality, feminism, colonialism, and religious plurality. To anticipate my reflections on Kwok’s theology of

²⁴ Kwok, *Discovering the Bible in the Non-Biblical World*, 36.

religions, it is essential to locate religious pluralism between feminism and postcolonialism, just as it is essential to place Asian feminism between postcolonialism and religious pluralism, and to situate postcolonialism between feminism and religious pluralism. It is in this triple intersectionality that Kwok formulates her theology of religions.

From Textual Interpretation to Oral Hermeneutics

In dialogical hermeneutics, in addition to the written texts which historically privileged men, oral traditions, which precede the writing of the sacred texts and to which all members of the community, including women, can contribute, must be brought to bear on the interpretation of the scriptures. What the scriptures say is important but equally important is what the people—especially the poor, the women, and the colonized—say when hearing, reading, and interpreting them. Kwok views the scriptures of any religion, and the Bible in particular, not as the authoritative and infallible source of timeless and universal doctrines or indisputable historical facts, but primarily as “a talking book,” a living artifact that invites dialogue and conversation among all people—especially the marginalized, subjugated, and colonized groups—to negotiate its meaning for them. This is the oral hermeneutics that subverts the interpretation imposed on the subjugated communities by their overlords and colonizers.²⁵

Interpreting the Bible as a “talking book” emphasizes the importance of the oral transmission of the scriptures in Asian cultures and religions (“talking”); the open-ended nature of the Bible; the conversation among the listeners and readers of the Bible to discover its meaning, which is not limited to the pre-existing fixed truths and meanings handed down from the past or from above; and the multiplicity of voices that must be listened to in that conversation.²⁶ Kwok is quick to point out that oral hermeneutics does not eliminate the necessity of the historical-critical method,

²⁵ The expression “a talking book” is borrowed from Henry Louis Gate’s book, *The Signifying Monkey: A Theory of African-American Literary Criticism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988). For Kwok’s explanation of this reading strategy, see *Discovering the Bible in the Non-Biblical World*, 40–43.

²⁶ On Kwok’s view of oral hermeneutics in Asian feminist theology, see Kwok, *Discovering the Bible in the Non-Biblical World*, 44–56 (“Hearing and Talking: Oral Hermeneutics of Asian Women”).

which enjoys hegemony in the Western academy. Rather it contests the claim of the practitioners of this method that it is the only objective, scientific, and scholarly biblical hermeneutics, and vindicates the use of Asian resources for biblical hermeneutics, such as Asian myths, stories, legends, and the social biography of the people involved in the process of interpretation.

From Asian Interpretation to Feminist Hermeneutics

Among the multiplicity of voices that must be incorporated into biblical interpretation in Asia, Kwok maintains that Asian women's voices obtain the pride of place. "Asian" must not be understood generically, to mean a person born and living in Asia, but specifically, as genderized and racialized, as Asian women and men. Feminist hermeneutics of course privilege the voices of women, particularly in Asia, where, like in the Bible, their voices have often been silenced or oppressed. However, Kwok cautions that Asian Christian women must not simply apply the methods and ideas of Western white feminist biblical scholars, however insightful they are, to Asia as if different contexts did not matter. Rather, she urges them to adopt a "postcolonial imagination," which entails three interconnected and overlapping kinds of imagination: historical, dialogical, and diasporic.

Historical imagination delves into the history of the marginalized role of women in the church and society and critically examines certain practices that demean and harm women, such as fertility rites, dowry, widowhood, foot binding, polygamy, *sati*, female circumcision, and so on. Dialogical imagination connects the Asian Christian heritage with the multifaceted and stratified cultures of Asia; investigates the reconfigurations of these cultures by colonial regimes and the unholy trinity of capitalism, patriarchy, and Neo-Confucianism; and studies the different ways in which the colonized have resisted and subverted colonial domination—through parody, mimicry, irony, hybridity, double inscription, translation, and so on. Diasporic imagination connects Asians with the communities of immigrants, refugees, expatriates, exiles, and ethnic and racial minorities that are global, polycentric, displaced, and constantly relocated.²⁷ Such diasporic connection is all the more

²⁷ On Kwok Pui-lan's explanation of how these three imaginations function in Asian feminist theology, see *Postcolonial Imagination and Feminist Theology*, 31–51.

obligatory today when nations and personal identity are constituted by territorial borders, cultures, and religions as much as by transnationalism, borderless multiculturalism, and multiple religious belonging.

From Feminist Interpretation to Postcolonial Hermeneutics

A principal leitmotif of Kwok's later writings is postcolonialism and its impact on church and theology. In *Discovering the Bible in the Non-Biblical World*, postcolonialism as a theological discourse appears in chapter 6, titled "Woman, Dogs, and Crumb: Constructing a Postcolonial Discourse."²⁸ By contrast, in *Postcolonial Imagination and Feminist Theology*, as the title makes it clear, postcolonial imagination is the vantage point framing Kwok's entire feminist theology and her theology of religion. This postcolonial imagination entails three imaginations: historical, dialogical, and diasporic.

Reflecting on her thinking process as "an Asian, postcolonial feminist theologian," Kwok writes: "I discern three critical movements, which are not linear but overlapped and interwoven in intricate ways. They are more like motifs in a sonata, sometimes recurrent, sometimes disjointed, with one motif dominating at one moment, and another resurfacing at another point."²⁹ In developing the postcolonial imagination, Kwok draws liberally from anthropological, ethnographical, historical, sociological, literary, and cultural studies of colonialism, imperialism, and postcolonialism to develop her own theologies of feminism and religions.³⁰ She notes that whereas the study of religion has made extensive use of these disciplines to scrutinize how colonial interests have impacted upon its field of study, "Christian theologians have seldom engaged in a parallel self-critical reflection of their discipline. The issues of colonialism and empire-building have not been central concerns for American theologians, including the feminists among them."³¹

²⁸ Kwok, *Postcolonial Imagination and Feminist Theology*, 71–83.

²⁹ Kwok, *Postcolonial Imagination and Feminist Theology*, 30–31.

³⁰ For helpful studies on postcolonialism, see Henry Schwartz and Sangeeta Ray, eds., *A Companion to Postcolonial Studies* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2000), and on cultural studies, see Toby Miller, ed., *A Companion to Cultural Studies* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2001).

³¹ Kwok, *Postcolonial Imagination and Feminist Theology*, 187.

While deeply appreciative of the work of white feminists, Kwok faults them for their lack of attention to the intersections between patriarchy and colonialism/imperialism. Those she mentions include Mary Daly, Rosemary Radford Ruether, Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, Rebecca Chopp, and Kathryn Tanner.³² By contrast, Kwok praises the work of Third-World and indigenous women who have explored the intersectionality of colonialism on the one hand, and race, gender, ethnicity, class, economic injustice, political oppression, and militarism on the other, in their own cultures.³³

Kwok suggests that postcolonial feminist theology should perform at least three tasks: first, “resignifying gender,” that is, re-examining the significance of gender in the context of different geographical spaces, the global context, and among all peoples of the world, not only in the European and American contexts. It must also make use of homegrown resources rather than French convoluted poststructuralist theories. Second, “requeering sexuality,” that is, highlighting the historical connections between gender and sexuality on the one hand and colonialism and imperialism on the other, and doing what Kwok calls a “new genealogy of morals,” that is, “tracing the origin and development of moral teachings about sexuality and their religious justification in the wider framework of the cultivation of the bourgeois self and national and international politics.”³⁴ In this new genealogy of morals, Kwok argues, the connections between sexuality and race on the one hand and colonialism and imperialism on the other will be made clear. Third, “redoing theology,” by “writing back” to the Empire and unmasking the negative impact of colonialism and imperialism on theology, religion, and ecology.³⁵

³² On the need to make connections between postcolonial criticism and feminist hermeneutics, see Kwok, *Postcolonial Imagination and Feminist Theology*, 77–99. This third chapter of the book is appropriately titled: “Making Connections: Postcolonial Studies and Feminist Biblical Interpretation.”

³³ See Kwok Pui-lan, ed., *Hope Abundant: Third World and Indigenous Women’s Theology* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 2010). This volume contains the essays of some of the twenty six participants in the conference sponsored by the Women’s Commission of the Ecumenical Association of Third World Theologians in the city of Oaxtepec, Mexico, December 1986.

³⁴ Kwok, *Postcolonial Imagination and Feminist Theology*, 142.

³⁵ See Kwok, *Postcolonial Imagination and Feminist Theology*, 128–149. Kwok has edited together with Don H. Compier and Joerg Rieger a large volume on the

From Postcolonial Interpretation to Multifaith Hermeneutics

Kwok's mention of the impact of colonialism on theology and religion leads us to the final stage of the trajectory of her theology of religion, namely, the need for multifaith hermeneutics. In a succinct and densely-packed statement, Kwok explains the tasks of she calls the postcolonial and feminist "theology of religious difference":

Postcolonial theory calls into question the construction and maintenance of religious boundaries and the assumptions behind much of interreligious dialogue. This has particular relevance for Asian Christian theology because Asian theologians have been in the forefront of interreligious, sometimes called interfaith, dialogues. While the Christocentrism of much of these dialogues has been challenged, Asian theologians need to contribute to the theoretical thinking and postcolonial discussions of religious difference. Asian feminist theologians are known in the ecumenical circles for their "syncretism" and their defying rigid and stable identities.³⁶

Three major points are made in this statement. First, postcolonial theories challenge the construction and maintenance of religious boundaries and the theological assumptions undergirding interreligious dialogue. Second, Asian theologians are called to formulate postcolonial theories of religious difference. Third, Asian feminist theologians must respond to the accusation of syncretism when they reject rigid and stable religious identities.

A prior question to Kwok's theology of religion is why and how multifaith hermeneutics is an essential part of the oral, Asian, feminist, postcolonial interpretation of the Bible in a non-Christian world. Why must Asian people read the sacred scriptures of other religions and interpret their own Bible in conversation with people of other faiths, thus practicing a "multifaith hermeneutics"? If so, what is "multifaith hermeneutics"? By "multifaith hermeneutics" Kwok means a hermeneutics that "assumes the willingness to look at one's own tradition from other perspectives, the maturity to discern both similarities and differences in various traditions, and

Christian Tradition with its influential figures from the perspective of Empire: *Empire. The Christian Tradition: New Readings of Classical Theologians* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2007), an indispensable textbook in any course on the Christian Tradition.

³⁶ Kwok, *Postcolonial Imagination and Feminist Theology*, 145.

the humility to learn from other partners in the conversation. Multifaith hermeneutics requires us to affirm that other religious traditions are as valid as Christianity."³⁷ According to Kwok, multifaith hermeneutics can be done in three ways. First, it can be done by comparing similar motifs through cross-textual studies in order to reach a better understanding of one's own religious tradition. Examples include the creation myths in many religious narratives and Jesus' Great Commission (Matt. 28:16-20) and the Buddha's mission command to his followers in the Mahāvagga.³⁸ Second, it can be done by looking at the Bible from the perspective of people of other faiths. Kwok cites two examples, that of Gandhi, who reads Jesus' Sermon on the Mount through the Hindu prescription of *ahimsa* (non-injury, nonviolence), and Seichi Yagi, who interprets Jesus' "I" statements, which imply his divine subject, in light of the Mahāyāna Buddhist teaching on the buddha-nature in all living beings.³⁹ Third, it can be done by using Asian myths, stories, fables, and legends to interpret the Bible. This hermeneutics is used by the Taiwanese theologian C. S. Song; the Japanese theologian Yuko Yuasa, who uses stories in Noh drama to challenge the themes of servanthood and self-sacrifice in the Bible; and the Filipino theologian Levi V. Oracion, who uses the Mindanao myth of Chief Indarapatra reviving Sulayman who has been killed by the monsters to understand the resurrection of Jesus.⁴⁰

Kwok hastens to add that multifaith hermeneutics, which affirms that truth and wisdom are found not only in the Bible but also in the cultures, histories, and religions of people of other faiths, requires a serious cross-cultural and comparative study of Asian cultural and religious traditions. It must also avoid setting up a contrast between high culture and popular culture and romanticizing the latter as the source of social transformation. Furthermore, women who are engaged in interfaith hermeneutics are conscious of the androcentric nature of not only the Bible but also the scriptures of other religions and Asian cultures. Asian women cannot simply give blanket consent to both the Bible and Asian

³⁷ Kwok, *Discovering the Bible in the Non-Biblical World*, 58.

³⁸ Kwok cites the work of Archie Lee from Hong Kong and George M. Soares-Prabhu from India. See Kwok, *Discovering the Bible in the Non-Biblical World*, 62–63.

³⁹ Kwok, *Discovering the Bible in the Non-Biblical World*, 63–64.

⁴⁰ Kwok, *Discovering the Bible in the Non-Biblical World*, 65–66.

sacred scriptures, but must approach them with “a process of double hermeneutics of suspicion and reclamation.”⁴¹

Beyond a Pluralistic Theology of Religion: A Postcolonial Theology of Religious Difference

Kwok’s oral, Asian, feminist, postcolonial, and multifaith hermeneutics serve as epistemological foundations for her theology of religion. These five components represent not so much five successive stages of Kwok’s theology of religions as five recurrent motifs in a sonata, with one dominating at one moment and another at another moment. The postcolonial motif, in my judgment, is one that dominates Kwok’s latest writings on the theology of religion.⁴²

Kwok begins by tracing the development of the comparative study of religion and theology in the Enlightenment, as represented by Friedrich Schleiermacher, Ernest Renan, F. Max Müller, the *Religionsgeschichtliche Schule*, Ernst Troeltsch, and Karl Barth, and argues that they all harbor a racial, colonialist and imperialist bias against religions other than Christianity, which is taken to be the final and highest product of humankind’s religious evolution from polytheism to monotheism.⁴³ A century later, the issue of the relation between Christianity and other religions resurfaced, but in a different cultural, political, and theological context, especially since the 1960s. The missionary movement with its triumphalist “fulfillment” theology and *mission civilizatrice* was coming to an end. So too did colonialism, with the rise of national independence in the Third World. The Second Vatican Council (1962-1965) introduced an attitude of respect to and cooperation with believers of other religions. In the US, migration has created a multicultural and religiously pluralistic society, which makes the older exclusivist theology of religion unacceptable.

Kwok acknowledges that the other two theologies of religion, namely, inclusivism and especially pluralism, as espoused by John Cobb, Gordon Kaufman, Rosemary Radford Ruether, John Hick,

⁴¹ Kwok, *Discovering the Bible in the Non-Biblical World*, 70.

⁴² The two main sources of Kwok’s theology of religion are: Chapter 8 of *Postcolonial Imagination and Feminist Theology*, titled “Beyond Pluralism: Toward a Postcolonial Theology of Religious Difference”; and Kwok, *Globalization, Gender, and Peacebuilding* (Mahwah, N.J.: Paulist Press, 2012), a collection of the three Madaleva Lectures given at Saint Mary’s College, Notre Dame, IN, in 2011.

⁴³ See Kwok, *Postcolonial Imagination and Feminist Theology*, 189–197.

Paul Tillich, and legions of their followers, represent an advance over exclusivism.⁴⁴ However, she finds their theories all wanting because they have failed to understand that their concept of “religion” is vitiated by colonialism. She cites with approval Timothy Fitzgerald’s comment that “the construction of ‘religion’ and ‘religions’ as global, cross-cultural objects of study has been part of a wider historical process of western imperialism, colonialism, and neocolonialism.”⁴⁵

To remedy this deficiency, Kwok proposes what she calls “A Postcolonial Theology of Religious Difference.” Two words are operative here: “postcolonial” and “difference.” I have noted above the three issues involved in the theology of religions and would like to see how Kwok handles them. The first concerns the construction and maintenance of religious boundaries and the theological assumptions undergirding interreligious dialogue. Here Kwok suggests that the three contemporary theologies of religion, however different from one another they are, all assume that religion can be separated from other cultural and social relations as a *sui generis* domain apart from cultural, postcolonial, and transnational studies. Rather, like David Chidester, whom she cites approvingly, Kwok argues that religion is “intrareligious and interreligious networks of cultural relations,” and laments that “theologies of religion have so far often treated religion as if it exists in a vacuum, separated from all other networks of social relations.”⁴⁶ And one key network of social relations that the theologians of religion mentioned above have allegedly ignored is that of colonialism, imperialism, and neocolonialism.

The second issue concerns the need to formulate postcolonial theories of religious difference. Given the postcolonial context, Kwok says that “the issue before us is not religious diversity, but religious *difference* as it is constituted and produced in concrete situations, often with significant power differentials.”⁴⁷ Religious

⁴⁴ For Kwok’s exposition of contemporary theologies of religion, see *Globalization, Gender, and Peacebuilding*, 8–30.

⁴⁵ Kwok, *Globalization, Gender, and Peacebuilding*, 202. The cited work of Fitzgerald is: *The Ideology of Religious Studies* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2003), 8.

⁴⁶ Kwok, *Postcolonial Imagination and Feminist Theology*, 205. Chidester’s work cited by Kwok is “Anchoring Religion in the World: A Southern African History of Comparative Religion,” *Religion* 26 (1996): 155.

⁴⁷ Kwok, *Postcolonial Imagination and Feminist Theology*, 205. Emphasis added.

difference, as opposed to diversity, is seen in the colonial context by the colonizing religious power to imply otherness, inferiority, superstition, heterodoxy, and something to be eliminated, with military power if necessary. By proposing a colonial theology of religious difference, Kwok points out the historically colonialist concept of “religion” and intends to subvert it.

The third issue concerns the accusation of syncretism against an Asian feminist theology of religion in which rigid and stable religious identities are rejected. Kwok retorts that “Christianity has never been pure and has continuously, from its beginning, adopted elements from different cultures. It is only when non-Western churches are doing so that more established churches and theologians label such practices as ‘syncretism’ in a derogatory sense, to exercise control and power.”⁴⁸ Equally important, Kwok points out, is the fact that in religiously pluralistic Asia, where religious identities are not clearly and rigidly defined, there is much fluid adaptation and exchange among different religions such as one can have multiple or hybrid religious identities, which is a common hallmark of postcolonialism.⁴⁹ To summarize her theology of religions, Kwok adopts the term “polydoxy.” Drawn from multiple sources, including feminist, pluralist, poststructuralist, and process theories, polydoxy “debunks the myth of the superiority of one God, one creed, and one church, and holds multiple traditions and perspectives together when looking at God and reality.”⁵⁰

Toward an Asian-American Postcolonial Theology of Religion

This concluding part attempts to delineate the contours of an Asian-American postcolonial feminist theology of religious pluralism and suggests some ways in which Kwok’s insights can be developed further. A portrayal of Asian-American postcolonial

⁴⁸ Kwok, *Postcolonial Imagination and Feminist Theology*, 161.

⁴⁹ On multiple identities and hybridity, see Kwok, *Globalization, Gender, and Peacebuilding*, 56–64.

⁵⁰ Kwok, *Globalization, Gender, and Peacebuilding*, 77. Kwok is concerned that this vision of religion (John Thatamanil calls it “a binocular religious vision”) shapes the practice of Christian ministry and the pedagogy in theological schools. See Kwok Pui-lan and Stephen Burns, eds., *Postcolonial Practice of Ministry: Leadership, Liturgy, and Interfaith Engagement* (Lanham: Lexington Books, 2016) and Kwok Pui-lan, Cecilia González-Andrieu, and Dwight N. Hopkins, eds., *Teaching Global Theologies: Power and Praxis* (Baylor, TX: Baylor University Press, 2015).

feminist theology of religious pluralism must examine its three concepts, namely, Asian-American, postcolonial, and feminist. This is an exceedingly difficult task since all these three concepts are highly contested. Nevertheless, it must be attempted to appreciate how Kwok's theology can contribute to the theology of religion.

There has been an extensive and still inconclusive debate on what is meant by "Asian," "American," "Asian American" (with or without the hyphen), and Asian America.⁵¹ The American Census Bureau uses "Asian" as a racial category to refer to the people from South Asia, East Asia, and Southeast Asia, excluding West Asia (the Middle East) and Central Asia.⁵² The term "Asian American" was coined by Yuji Ichioka in 1968 in connection with the founding of the Asian American Political Alliance.⁵³

While such neologism is useful in uniting disparate groups of Americans of Asian descent for political purposes and activism constituting a kind of "Asian American panethnicity,"⁵⁴ it tends to paper over real and even conflictive differences among the various Asian national and ethnic groups, particularly in terms of language, history, ideology, customs, culture, and religion. For instance, China and India, the two demographically largest countries in the world, have little in common in terms of civilization, language, culture, and religion. Furthermore, their past and current economic, political, and military relations have been fraught. As a result, there is little in common between Chinese Americans and Indian Americans. Even

⁵¹ In the United Nations' usage, "Asia" includes Central Asia and West Asia in addition to East Asia, Southeast Asia, South Asia. On the emergence of Asian America, see David Palumbo-Liu, *Asian/America: Historical Crossings of a Racial Frontier* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1999), 17–42. Note the solidus dividing "Asian" and "American" rather than the hyphen bridging the two realities.

⁵² In 1997, the American Census Bureau distinguished "Asians" from "Native Hawaiians and Other Pacific Islanders" as two different racial categories.

⁵³ Needless to say, the definition of "Asian American" has a direct relevance for the academic discipline of "Asian American Studies." See Jean Yu-wen Wu and Thomas C. Chen, eds., *Asian American Studies Now: A Critical Reader* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2010) and Kent A. Ono, ed., *A Companion to Asian American Studies* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2005). For a brief discussion of the substantive difference between "Asian American" (unhyphenated) and "Asian-American" (hyphenated), see David L. Eng, "Out Here and Over There: Queerness and Diaspora in Asian American Studies," in Kent A. Ono, ed., *A Companion to Asian American Studies*, 355–357.

⁵⁴ See Yen Le Espiritu, *Asian American Panethnicity: Bridging Institutions and Identities* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1984).

among countries under Chinese influence, especially in terms of Confucianism and Daoism, such as Japan, Korea, Taiwan, and Vietnam, little if any commonality exists. On the contrary, their past histories of colonization and imperialism have pitted the citizens of these countries against one another and against the Chinese, even in America. The same is true of the citizens of India, Pakistan, and Sri Lanka, all parts of South Asia. Finally, while communication among the Hispanic/Latinx American groups is made possible by the languages of their long Iberian colonization, Asian Americans share no common language family or language, except English. Ironically, even Chinese Americans cannot understand each other since Cantonese, Mandarin, Taishanese, and Hokkien, the main languages of Chinese Americans, are not mutually intelligible; and the same is true of Americans of South Asian descent.

Despite its ambiguity, many Asian-American scholars, especially in the humanities and the social sciences, find the term “Asian American” useful in the racialized context of the US to highlight the “shared racial experience.”⁵⁵ It is interesting to note that in her earlier works, Kwok did not pay as much attention to the *Asian American* context as the *Asian* context.⁵⁶ Furthermore, for understandable reasons, when referring to “Asia” she focuses more on East Asia, especially China, than on South Asia and Southeast Asia. It was only after her involvement in the Pacific, Asian, and North American Asian Women in Theology and Ministry (PANAAWTM) that Kwok dealt with the “North American Asian.”⁵⁷ Like most other scholars, Kwok takes “Asian American” to refer to their “shared racial experience,” and more specifically, to the impact of colonialism on Asian Americans and the Asian diasporic condition.⁵⁸ More recently, Kwok went beyond North America to include the global context, especially by considering teaching global

⁵⁵ Chong-Suk Winter Han, *Geisha of a Different Kind: Race and Sexuality in Gays America* (New York: New York University Press, 2015), 4.

⁵⁶ Recall her dissertation on Chinese women and her book on Asian feminist theology.

⁵⁷ See Kwok Pui-lan, “Fishing the Asia Pacific,” in *Off the Menu: Asian and Asian North American Women’s Religion and Theology*, eds. Rita Nakashima Brock, Jung Ha Kim, Kwok Pui-lan, and Seung Ai Yang, 3–22; and Kwok Pui-lan, “Introduction,” in *Asian and Asian American Women in Theology and Religion*, ed. Kwok Pui-lan, 1–12.

⁵⁸ See Kwok Pui-lan, *Postcolonial Imagination and Feminist Theology*, 38–51.

theologies⁵⁹ and Third-World and indigenous women's theology.⁶⁰ Thus, Kwok's noteworthy contribution to the theology of religion is her expansion of the "Asian American" component to include the global perspective, especially the voices of the so-called Third-World women.

On the postcolonial aspect of the theology of religion, Kwok is not the lone voice on postcolonial theology. On postcolonial hermeneutics and theology, none has matched the prolific productivity of the Sri Lankan biblical scholar and theologian R. S. Sugirtharajah, whose works Kwok often appeals to.⁶¹ But Kwok deserves special commendation for highlighting the historical and ideological connections, often ignored, between colonialism on the one hand and patriarchy and the negative attitude toward Asian religions on the other.⁶² It is commonly acknowledged that Christian missions in Asia have been entangled with imperialism and colonialism, and therefore an Asian Christian theology must be the site of postcolonial resistance. In Kwok's postcolonial theology, "Asia" and "Asianness" are, as Shui-Man Kwan points out, "changing, heterogeneous, complex, fluid, and fragmented."⁶³

Kwok's postcolonial theology provides helpful tools to formulate an "Asian" theology of resistance by deploying its historical, dialogical, and diasporic imagination. But it also presents serious challenges to the creation of an "Asian-American," panethnic theology since imperialism and colonization was not only a Western project against Asian countries but was also carried out by one Asian nation against another. Recall China's 1000-year-long domination over Vietnam and Japan's 45-year-long annexation of Korea, just to mention two cases. Such events cannot be glossed over in an Asian-

⁵⁹ See Kwok Pui-lan, "Teaching Theology from a Global Perspective," in *Teaching Global Theologies: Power and Praxis*, eds. Kwok Pui-lan, Cecilia González-Andrieu and Dwight N. Hopkins (Baylor: Baylor University Press, 2015), 11-27.

⁶⁰ See Kwok Pui-lan, "Introduction," in *Hope Abundant: Third World and Indigenous Women's Theology*, ed. Kwok Pui-lan (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 2010), 1-15.

⁶¹ For a study of R. S. Sugirtharajah, see Tat-siong Benny Liew, ed., *Postcolonial Interventions: Essays in Honor of R. S. Sugirtharajah* (Sheffield: Sheffield Phoenix Press 2009).

⁶² See Kwok Pui-lan, *Postcolonial Imagination and Feminist Theology*, 77-99.

⁶³ See Simon Shui-Man Kwan, *Postcolonial Resistance and Asian Theology* (London: Routledge, 2014), 22. Kwan presents Kwok's theology on pp. 18-22.

American postcolonial theology that is historically self-conscious. There is another, perhaps thornier, challenge to the articulation of an Asian-American postcolonial theology, namely, the fact that a majority of contemporary Asian Americans have no memory, much less personal experience, of the colonization of their countries of origin and as a result, “postcoloniality” does not resonate with them. One way to overcome this danger of irrelevance is, as Sugirtharajah has suggested, to expand “postcolonial” beyond past historical events of conquest and domination to include ongoing and subtle but no less oppressive forms of colonization through neo-capitalism and globalization, to which Asian and Asian-American women in particular are being subjected.⁶⁴ In this way, Asian-American postcolonial theology is not bogged down by “narrow nationalism, identity politics, and ethnic separatism,” and can “form coalitions among women and to strengthen solidarity across national, cultural, economic, and religious boundaries.”⁶⁵ In this Asian-American postcolonial theology, questions of power, authority, identity, hybridity, and diaspora will have a central place, but will be broached with “diasporic consciousness” to eschew the danger of “mimicry,” that is, of reinscribing the colonial ideology in the colonial subjects.⁶⁶

Lastly, Kwok insists that a theology of religion must be of feminist orientation. She is, without doubt, one of the most influential exponents of Asian and Asian-American feminist theology. Her significant contribution to the Christian theology of religion and religious pluralism lies in her critical analysis of the intersections of gender, colonialism, and Christianity. By intertwining these three realities together, Kwok moves the discussion of religious pluralism away from the well-worn triple paradigm of exclusivism, inclusivism, and pluralism, and focuses rather on the plight of women all over the world as the starting point for a theology of religion. Thus she challenges Christianity and all other religions to acknowledge their complicity in the systemic

⁶⁴ See R. S. Sugirtharajah, *Postcolonial Reconfigurations: An Alternative Way of Reading the Bible and Doing Theology* (London: SCM Press, 2003).

⁶⁵ Kwok Pui-lan, *Introducing Asian Feminist Theology* (Cleveland: The Pilgrim Press, 2000), 36–37.

⁶⁶ See Benny Tat-siong Liew, *Politics of Patousia: Reading Mark Inter(Con)Textually* (Leiden: Brill, 1999).

oppression and marginalization of women. In so doing, Kwok suggests, the church will be compelled to recognize the necessity of “polydoxy,” namely, the “idea that Christians do not have a monopoly on God’s revelation and that divinity should be understood in terms of multiplicity, open-endedness, and relationality.”⁶⁷ Polydoxy requires a thorough reexamination of the Christian theology of God,⁶⁸ Christology,⁶⁹ ecclesiology,⁷⁰ and sexuality.⁷¹

Kwok Pui-lan’s Asian-American postcolonial feminist theology of religious difference is a major contribution to the contemporary theology of religion. Its three components—Asian-American, postcolonial, and feminist—by no means command universal acceptance as each of them, as shown above, is hotly contested. However, Kwok’s insights on the intersections of colonialism, gender, and religion offer fresh materials to construct a challenging theology of religion.

⁶⁷ Kwok, *Globalization, Gender, and Peacebuilding*, 70.

⁶⁸ Kwok Pui-lan, *Asian Feminist Theology*, 65–78.

⁶⁹ Kwok Pui-lan, *Asian Feminist Theology*, 79–97.

⁷⁰ Kwok Pui-lan, *Asian Feminist Theology*, 98–112.

⁷¹ Kwok Pui-lan, *Asian Feminist Theology*, 113–125.

Imagining Transnational Feminist Theo-Ethics and Solidarity

Keun-Joo Christine Pae

“In mobilization of transnational networks that stand in solidarity with . . . victims of violence, war, and oppression, we see the grace of God – divine interstitial power at work. Such a power is energizing and enabling, because it rejoices in creating 'synergetic relations,' readjusts and shifts to find new strength, and discovers hope in the densely woven web of life that sustains us all.”

Kwok Pui-lan, “Fishing the Asia Pacific”

I am writing this essay in times of the COVID-19 pandemic, Black Lives Matter movements, and the damaging effects of climate change on the poor across the globe. These events are a spectacular display of how the personal is internationally political and spiritual, as well as how all forms of lives are interconnected. Although the entire world seems to struggle with commonly shared crises, from militarized violence to a pandemic, we are not equal in these crises. Global crises disproportionately affect minoritized populations, including refugees in camps, women of color in the global supply chain, older people with insufficient economic and health resources, people with disabilities, migrants, sex workers, only to name a few. These peoples are victimized by global crises. On the other hand, however, they actively produce knowledge about global injustices, relations of global ruling, and finally transnational feminist ethics. As transnational feminist Chandra Mohanty accentuates, globally disenfranchised people’s embodiment and personification of the intersection of sexual, class, and racial relations and colonialism ground transnational feminist ethics with historical specificities.¹

¹ Chandra Mohanty, *Feminism without Borders: Decolonizing Theory, Practicing Solidarity* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2003), 52.

How can we, critical theologians and ethicists, engage in transnational feminist knowledge? How would transnational feminist theo-ethics look when there is a massive gap between the values we cherish and the realities we live in and witness? Who can do transnational feminist theo-ethics? Kwok Pui-lan asked similar questions of who can do postcolonial feminist theology and how one can do it.² Kwok's questions challenge feminist theologians who must share the responsibility for global peace and justice to contemplate how to think of God and do postcolonial/transnational feminist theology in their times. At times like these, we, Christian feminist ethicists, should elaborate on creative and audacious theological discourse for global peace and justice because the sanctity of life is at stake. A new transnational feminist theo-ethical discourse should be radical enough to challenge people of faith to walk away from habitual ways of thinking and living.

Transnational feminism is radical praxis, which, according to M. Jacqui Alexander and Chandra Mohanty, must wrestle with "the ethics of the cross-cultural production of knowledge" and "politics of power, spatiality, and knowledge production."³ With Alexander and Mohanty's cautions, I critically reflect on how to produce transnational feminist theo-ethical discourse "in proximity with" women in the postcolonial world. "Proximity" means that transnational feminists do not aim to speak on behalf of third world women. Instead, we critically interrogate how the relations of ruling (i.e., racism, heterosexism, colonialism, and neoliberal capitalism, etc.) have fragmented and compartmentalized stories and simultaneously embodied knowledge of marginalized women across the globe. This interrogation would further lead us to retell, resurge, and reimagine feminist stories of resistance, survival, and the Sacred, which all compose what I call spiritual activism: inseparability between one's inner spiritual transformation and social transformation. As Kwok Pui-lan argues, resignifying gender and sexuality is crucial in doing and imagining postcolonial/

² Kwok Pui-lan, *Postcolonial Imagination and Feminist Theology* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2005), 125.

³ M. Jacqui Alexander and Chandra Talpade Mohanty, "Cartographies of Knowledge and Power: Transnational Feminism as Radical Praxis," in *Critical Transnational Feminist Praxis*, eds. Amanda Lock Swarr and Richa Nagar (State University of New York Press, 2010), 42.

transnational feminist theology. The sexual and gendered stories from the global poor become the binding site for producing liberative theological knowledge of "interstitial integrity."

This essay's primary goal is to search for a radical and audacious transnational feminist ethic in our time that may create a space for transborder solidarity for peace and justice with an emphasis on healing the broken world. Asian/Asian American feminist theologians' elaboration on interstitial integrity as an image of God is crucial to my transnational feminist theo-ethics. I also engage with transnational feminist scholars, such as M. Jacqui Alexander and Chandra Mohanty, for a feminist theoretical lens for "the transnational"; and womanist scholar Layli Maparyan for spiritual activism. Asian/Asian American feminist theologians, especially Kwok Pui-lan and Rita Nakashima Brock, shape critical feminist theological discourse on interstitial integrity and transnational feminist solidarity. Based on dialogue with various feminist scholars, I argue for a transnational feminist theo-ethic as radical spiritual activism that must involve writing and rewriting of the Sacred and postcolonial women's survival wisdom as well as actively pursuing transnational solidarity from where we stand.

Transnational in Transnational Feminist Theo-Ethics

On a fundamental level, theology is a God-talk and ethics is a question of how to live. A theo-ethical discourse contemplates two interrelated questions of how to live based on knowledge about God and how to produce this knowledge. Since any form of knowledge is inscribed to the power structure, feminist theo-ethics inquire about "who" is producing a God-talk and how theological discourse has affected gender relations and vice versa. Feminist theo-ethicists seriously consider the gendered and sexualized power structure embedded in theological talk. Just as Marcella Althaus-Reid argues that "all political theories are sexual theories with theological frames of support," it is necessary for transnational feminist theo-ethicists to interrogate the political-economic agenda, intricate with theological discourse built upon the interpellation of gender and sexual hierarchy.⁴

⁴ Marcella Althaus-Reid, *Indecent Theology: Theological Perversions in Sex, Gender, and Politics* (New York and London: Routledge, 2000), 176.

Furthermore, every knowledge is inseparable from the social locations of its producers. Despite its conceptual limit, the positionality or the social location of a producer of transnational feminist knowledge should be scrutinized in any discourse. However, one's positionality does not automatically guarantee or dismiss the legitimacy or authenticity of their transnational feminist knowledge. Instead, the positionality and social location merely mark a critical entry point to transnational feminism and theo-ethics. Let us first consider the term "transnational feminism."

Transnational feminism is radical praxis to change the global power structure for peace and justice because our everyday micropolitics reflect macropolitics and vice versa. After having critically reviewed Women's Studies Programs in US colleges and universities, two leading transnational feminist scholars, M. Jacqui Alexander and Chandra Mohanty, define "the transnational" in transnational feminism in their 1997 anthology:

(1) A way of thinking about women in similar contexts across the world, in different geographical spaces, rather than as all women across the world; (2) an understanding of a set of unequal relationships among and between peoples, rather than a set of traits embodied in all non-U.S. citizens (particularly because U.S. citizenship continues to be premised within a white, Eurocentric, masculinist, heterosexist regime); and (3) a consideration of the term "international" in relation to an analysis of economic, political, and ideological processes which foreground the operations of race and capitalism (for instance, those which would therefore require taking critical antiracist, anti-capitalist positions that would make feminist solidarity work possible).⁵

Their definition of the transnational highlights how to trace the transnational linkage of political economic oppression without considering so-called global and transnational women as collectively embodying third-worldness marked with exotic culture, Orientalism, colonialism, poverty, and misogynistic and patriarchal religion. Mohanty's 1989 article, "Under Western Eyes: Feminist

⁵ M. Jacqui Alexander and Chandra Mohanty, "Introduction: Genealogies, Legacies, Movements," in *Feminist Genealogies, Colonial Legacies, Democratic Futures*, eds. M. Jacqui Alexander and Chandra Mohanty (London and New York: Routledge, 1997), xix.

Scholarship and Colonial Discourses," criticizes a group of Western feminist scholars precisely for reproducing colonized knowledge of third world women. These scholars lump third world women into one general group oppressed by the heteropatriarchal familial system and religious ideologies, while detaching them from historical contexts, as if misogynistic religious ideologies, patriarchy, poverty, and racism marked the fundamental characters of third-worldness and, thus, were ahistorical.⁶ Despite their (presumed) good intentions, Western feminist scholars often fail to speak in proximity to third-world women. They tend to emphasize gender oppression over other forms of oppression rather than analyze gender oppression interlocked with colonialism, globalization, and racism, as well as the intricate collaboration between third world women and men in social movements. As a result, third world women appear like victims to be saved from their male counterparts. White feminists create further epistemological roadblocks because they suppose universality of (white liberal) feminist methods, economic development as a universal solution, superiority of Western feminism, and (presumed) rationality of secular liberal feminism in opposition to religious feminism.⁷

Mohanty's critique applies to feminist theologies. As Kwok Pui-lan critically observes, much of white liberal middle-class feminist theological discourse concentrates on "challenging the construction of gender at the cultural and symbolic level."⁸ Although challenging the interpellation of metaphors, symbols, meaning-making, and religious ideologies is an essential feminist activity, this activity involves a process which requires a critical reflection on what "sources" we use and what "material" changes the meaning-making business will bring. Since gender oppression is always interlocked with other forms of oppression, the meaning-making of gender in feminist theology alone does not necessarily change the realities of poor women or the political economy. In the worst case, feminist theology becomes a "decent" academic business to benefit middle-class white women who are privileged to ignore the messy relations of ruling other than gender.

⁶ Mohanty, *Feminism without Borders*, 17–42.

⁷ Mohanty, *Feminism without Borders*, 38–42.

⁸ Kwok, *Postcolonial Imagination and Feminist Theology*, 129.

Alexander and Mohanty expand on their first definition of the transnational. The revision is necessary. The neoliberal market economy, global militarism, armed conflicts, the rise of religious fundamentalism, and settler colonialism have intensified the system of suffering inflicted on women of color globally. In the meantime, women's transnational solidarity movements, including Indigenous women's radical activism for bodily sovereignty, have become more strategic, creative, and global. Academic discourses of the transnational, especially in feminist and LGBT/queer studies, have also been prolific in North America.⁹ Alexander and Mohanty assert that their earlier definitions of the transnational should wrestle with the following:

(1) The links between the politics of location, the spatiality of power, and that of knowledge production; (2) the physicality and materiality of space in terms of contestation over land; (3) a sharper focus on the ethics of the cross-cultural production of knowledge; and (4) a foregrounding of questions of intersubjectivity, connectivity, collective responsibility, and mutual accountability as fundamental markers of a radical praxis.¹⁰

Alexander and Mohanty's four points of scrutiny are transnational feminist ethics on how we live our own lives "as scholars, teachers, and organizers, and our relations to labor and practices of consumption in an age of privatization, and hegemonic imperial projects that are at stake."¹¹ Suppose the first set of Alexander and Mohanty's definition of the transnational is about how to conceptualize it in the global political economy. In that case, the second set underscores the required responsibility and integrity of transnational feminists. Producing knowledge can hardly be innocent from a profit-making economy. Producers collect materials from somewhere (i.e., two-thirds world), assemble them into pre-designed products, and sell them in the market. Multinational corporations exercise power to decide what can go into the market. These two transnational feminist scholars challenge us to critically analyze the entire process of making, sharing, and selling transnational feminist knowledge. A producer of knowledge's

⁹ Alexander and Mohanty, "Cartographies of Knowledge and Power," 24.

¹⁰ Alexander and Mohanty, "Cartographies of Knowledge and Power," 42.

¹¹ Alexander and Mohanty, "Cartographies of Knowledge and Power," 42.

positionality and social location should be interrogated in this academic market. More specifically, how do we produce knowledge? How do we consume it? Who offers materials for the production of knowledge? Who gets the benefit? Althaus-Reid once warned that Latin American Liberation theology has lost its revolutionary voice and become conventionally heterosexual to appeal to European and North American markets.¹² Certainly, transnational feminism as radical praxis contests the lucrative profit-driven-market economy's logic and continues to create alternative ways to produce and share knowledge horizontally.¹³

Any definition or even any genealogy of transnational feminism cannot capture diverse transnational feminist voices, rigorous scholarship, audacious resistance against the imperial relations of ruling, and ever-expanding feminist and LGBTQ global networks. Nonetheless, I map out transnational feminism with three key points. First, based on the critical observation that the personal is the internationally political, transnational feminism critically analyzes the complicated relationship between micropolitics in everyday life and macropolitics. Justice at a micropolitical level, even for personal relations, is inevitably connected to the macropolitical structure and its supportive ideologies. Second, while gender and sexuality are the crucial analytical tools, they should be utilized in analyzing the relations of ruling, such as colonialism, neoliberal capitalism, heteropatriarchy, racism, militarism, and subjectivity, agency, and knowledge production. Third, transnational feminism as radical praxis emphasizes recognizing the epistemic privilege of disenfranchised women, especially in the postcolonial world and First Nations. Their knowledge of the relations of ruling, political activism, and networking with other

¹² Althaus-Reid, *Indecent Theology*, 4–5.

¹³ The relationship between the market economy and the production of (academic) knowledge is an area that should be explored more. I have two cases in my mind. Recently, two publishing companies published two theological books on settler colonialism, decolonization movements, and resistance to militarism. Both books were anthologies that collected voices among the Global South scholars and scholars of color in North America. Each book is \$125. The price may discourage people from buying their own copies. As the publisher targets university libraries in North America and Western Europe, transnational knowledge collected in anthologies is likely to serve only a small number of students and scholars who have the privilege to access university libraries. These books are examples of not returning poor people's knowledge to them and their education.

women is the backbone of transnational feminism. Also, considering moral values, such as intersubjectivity, interconnectivity, accountability, and mutual responsibility, we should scrutinize the entire process of producing transnational feminist knowledge.

Transnational Feminist Theo-Ethics: Interstitial Integrity

Transnational feminist theo-ethics creatively and critically interweaves transnationalism, feminism, theology, and ethics: transnational feminist approaches to theo-ethics. Transnational feminist knowledge challenges an implicitly and explicitly heteropatriarchal God-talk and shows its impact on our everyday lives. Alternative God-talks inevitably require new ways of thinking and relating to others and non-Christian traditions. Transnational feminism is nothing new to feminist theologians of Pacific Asian North Asian American Women in Theology and Ministry (PANAAWTM) who reflect on their lives and religion, crossing multiple borders. I meditate on transnational feminist theo-ethics with PANAAWTM. Although my direct entry point to transnational feminist theo-ethics could be my experience of immigration to the US from South Korea and transpacific life, this experience can be reflected on only in connection to the collective memories of Asian diaspora (Korean diaspora in particular) as well as PANAAWTM's embodied knowledge of God from a transnational feminist perspective. God as "interstitial integrity" is a transnational feminist talk of God that arises among Asian American women who have crossed the Pacific Ocean and lived in the historical imagination of transpacific migration.

Rita Nakashima Brock's concept of "interstitial integrity" accentuates active remembering, re-remembering, and retrieving the historical memories of Asian/American women marred by European imperialism, patriarchy, racism, sexism, and neoliberal capitalism. Her theological concept, more significantly, honors Asian/American women's courage and activism for justice, equity, and peace, domestically and transnationally. According to Brock, "interstitial integrity more accurately describes how human beings construct a self in any culture" – this characterizes the story of race (Native Americans, whites, Blacks, Asian Americans, Latinx, and so forth) and immigration on North American soil.¹⁴ All of our

¹⁴ Rita Nakashima Brock, "Cooking without Recipes: Interstitial Integrity," in *Off*

identities on American soil have been differently and yet intersectionally constructed by colonization, transplanted and hence hybridized in North America. Brock traces interstitial integrity in Asian Pacific American women's work for justice, which has lasted since the late 19th century. Instead of splitting us into Asians or Americans, we have worked on both frontiers at once for justice for ourselves, our compatriots, and people in other countries.¹⁵ As Brock further stresses, interstitial integrity helps us be attuned to the fullness of life and participate in "its ever-changing rhythms and patterns rather than to be starved by unrealized hopes or a thin nostalgic past."¹⁶

Brock's elaboration of interstitial integrity frames the critical lens to analyze citizenship and immigration in the US primarily through the lens of gender, sexuality, class, and race. In terms of theological anthropology, Asian and Asian American women's critical reflection on citizenship and immigration unpacks a deeper meaning of God, which, in return, debunks racially and sexually oppressive ideologies and practices of citizenship and immigration laws. As Mohanty analyzes, citizenship and immigration laws in the US are fundamentally the process of defining insiders and outsiders through the weaponization of race, gender, sexuality, and religion.¹⁷ Global relations of inequality are manifested through these laws. For instance, women of color have entered the US labor force in domestic or laundry work, agricultural labor, garment industries, and sex industries. Lisa Lowe shows the transpacific connection of garment industries built upon the necessary alliance "between racialized and third world women within, outside, and across the border of the United States" under the condition of neoliberal capitalism.¹⁸ The garment industry's sweatshops in San Francisco and Los Angeles hire (undocumented) immigrant women from Mexico, El Salvador, Guatemala, Hong Kong, South Korea, Thailand, and the Philippines, where US transnational corporations are also conducting garment assembly work. Despite linguistic, cultural, religious, and national

the Menu: Asian and Asian North American Women's Religion and Theology, eds. Rita Nakashima Brock et al. (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2007), 136.

¹⁵ Brock, "Cooking without Recipes," 139.

¹⁶ Brock, "Cooking without Recipes," 139.

¹⁷ Mohanty, *Feminism without Borders*, 67.

¹⁸ Lisa Lowe, *Immigrant Acts: On Asian American Cultural Politics* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1996), 165.

differences, these immigrant women share material continuities not only among themselves, but also with Chicanas and Latinas who work in maquiladoras in Latin America and Asian women who work in textile factories in Southeast Asia, Bangladesh, India, and other parts of Asia.¹⁹

In addition, the neoliberal global market economy transcends citizenship bound with national borders, accelerating documented and undocumented immigration into economically developed countries across the globe. As Althaus-Reid reminds us, all political theories are sexual theories with theological support.²⁰ Citizenship laws in the US, along with white heteronormative empire-building, should be read theologically. Based on gender and sexuality, conventional Christian theology has frequently distinguished insiders (the saved) from outsiders (sinners and heathens). For instance, consider Jane Schaberg's critical study of Mary Magdalene demonstrates that women whose sexualities do not fit into heteropatriarchal norms should be first forgiven by Jesus for their sexual sins.²¹ Despite her essential leadership role in the early Christian church, Mary Magdalene has been called a forgiven sinner by a male Christ, as if her citizenship (or membership) with the church was conditional due to her gender and sexuality. Conditional citizenship is nothing new to women of color and third world women. Mohanty insightfully denotes that "notions of sexuality (morality of women), gender (familiar configurations), and race ("Oriental")" are implicitly written into laws of immigration, naturalization, and nationality in Euro-American liberal states.²² Colonial Christianity has a long history of sexually demoralizing women of color and thus, excluding them from the church and the state. For instance, white Christian colonialists saw both enslaved Black and Native American women as morally and sexually dirty, and as a result, rapable. Hypersexualization of Asian women is co-constitutive with the colonial legacy of demoralizing Black and Native female bodies. Contemporary nation-states' regulations on sexuality, gender, and race may offer comparative studies and

¹⁹ Lowe, *Immigrant Acts*, 165.

²⁰ Althaus-Reid, *Indecent Theology*, 176.

²¹ Jane Schaberg, *The Resurrection of Mary Magdalene: Legends, Apocrypha, and the Christian Testament* (New York: Continuum, 2004).

²² Mohanty, *Feminism without Borders*, 71.

struggles of US women of color and third world women. Religion should not be dismissed from these studies and struggles, either.

Felguni Sheth's critical investigation of US liberal democracy shows the systematic outcasting of Muslim men and women due to their distinctive differences in race, language, and religion/culture. The US government delineated and outlined Muslims through the local, national, and international media focus on the War on Terror. Islam has become equated with a radically foreign culture rather than religion.²³ Unlike Christianity, Islam cannot be a civic religion but is only a radically different culture, marred with irrationality. As a result, cultural difference becomes emphasized as the fundamental reason for Muslims' incapability to follow the values and laws of liberal democracy. Their incapability translates to a threat to the public who faithfully obey laws in the liberal secular state. Then, Muslim women's veil becomes the symbol of either submission to patriarchy or transgression to Western democratic values. The veil signifies gender oppression and violence, making Muslim women objects to be saved from their violent and oppressive male counterparts. In the meantime, the veil delivers a message of transgressing "a fundamental value of political liberalism: transparency or publicity."²⁴ The veiled body of women provokes suspicion, guilt, or something to hide. If women chose to wear veils, Western society, including liberal feminists, would discipline or punish Muslim women rather than recognize their agency because they cannot imagine Muslim women wearing veils without being coerced.

If we critically connected citizenship and immigration to interstitial integrity, we would see the physical, juridical, and social threat that those who live in in-between and hybridized spaces and cultures experience. They are immigrants of color, refugees, non-Christians, and third world women in the global supply chain whose loyalties to nation-states are tested and suspected. In these contexts, God as interstitial integrity reveals women's survival wisdom and courage, crossing multiple borders and boundaries. From a transnational feminist perspective, interstitial integrity shows multiple entry points to liberative theo-ethical knowledge,

²³ Felguni Sheth, *Toward a Political Philosophy of Race* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2009), 91.

²⁴ Sheth, *Toward a Political Philosophy*, 99.

destabilizing the complicatedly layered boundaries between the center and the periphery.

Furthermore, interconnectedness, rather than separation between insiders and outsiders, is a human reality in a globalized world. By contemplating the transpacific connection in garment industries and citizenship and immigration laws in liberal states, we can engage in comparative studies of women's experiences in similar contexts across the globe. Interconnectivity among these women expands on interstitial integrity beyond Asian and Asian American women's embodied knowledge of God. In other words, interstitial integrity challenges us to critically analyze our location in global politics in terms of spatial inequality. Instead of looking for nation-state bound citizenship, in interstitial integrity we can also see ourselves through the interconnection with others and imagine being "citizens of the universe," as Gloria Anzaldúa exclaims.²⁵ M. Jacqui Alexander also emphasizes the importance of observing and appreciating interconnectedness among all beings. Engaging in the Sacred in transnational feminism, she discovers that "the very core to a fundamental truth" is that "we are connected to the Divine through our connections with each other."²⁶ Alexander's words deepen the understanding of interstitial integrity as radical praxis. Colonialism, neocolonialism, and neoliberal global capitalism segregate and compartmentalize a self at both a material and a psychic level. Thus, the work of decolonization should make room for "the deep yearning for wholeness, often expressed as a yearning to belong . . . both material and existential, both psychic and physical, and which, when satisfied, can subvert and ultimately displace the pain of dismemberment."²⁷ Probing the Divine and the Sacred as interstitial integrity with Alexander's words filled with yearnings for wholeness, we may feel that interstitial integrity moves us to the work of decolonization with attention to healing the pain of dismemberment by rigorously building communities.

Decolonizing work is core to transnational feminism as radical praxis, and healing work based on the conscientization of interconnectedness can be done only in the community. Although

²⁵ AnaLouise Keating, "'I'm a Citizen of the Universe': Gloria Anzaldúa's Spiritual Activism as Catalyst for Social Change," *Feminist Studies* 34, no. 1/2 (2008): 53-69.

²⁶ M. Jacqui Alexander, *Pedagogies of Crossing: Meditations on Feminism, Sexual Politics, Memory, and the Sacred* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2005), 283.

²⁷ Alexander, *Pedagogies of Crossing*, 281.

transnational feminists often present an imagined community for anti-capitalist, anti-war, and antiracist work transnationally, they are physically grounded in particular communities such as PANAAWTM. Since our body is a medium to experience interstitial integrity and to carry out activism for peace and justice, our sense of belonging to a tangible community sustains our wholeness in a compartmentalized world. Through multiplying communities, transnational feminists as scholars, activists, and organizers have transgenerationally and transnationally cultivated wisdom to heal the broken and fragmented world. As Su Yon Pak and Jung Ha Kim underscore, PANAAWTM women remember, witness, and cultivate wisdom in between and among various human relationships—we are constituted by these relationships in friendships, in intergenerational relationships, and among members and leaders of the community.²⁸ In interstitial integrity, we breed wisdom, holding together what is seen and unseen and refusing to let go of either seemingly different worlds.²⁹ This wisdom gives us the freedom to be who we are. Wisdom born out of and nurtured in interstitial integrity empowers us to navigate life's uncertainties without fear while fostering community built upon genuine friendships.

Transnational Feminist Spiritual Activism

Transnational feminist solidarity that I imagine with interstitial integrity is a form of spiritual activism. According to womanist scholar Layli Maparyan, spiritual activism is “social or ecological transformational activity rooted in a spiritual belief system or set of spiritual practices,” and “putting spirituality to work for positive social and ecological change.”³⁰ Spiritual activism is visionary. Maparyan elaborates on the vision of “Luxocracy,” or rule by light: an earthbound political system that brings the material and the spiritual together. Differently from democracy founded on human rationality and liberty, Luxocracy's egalitarian vision rests on a foundation of spirituality. The system's emphasis on benevolence and nonviolence differentiates it from anarchy.³¹

²⁸ Su Yon Pak and Jung Ha Kim, “Introduction,” in *Leading Wisdom: Asian and Asian North American Women Leaders*, eds. Su Yon Pak and Jung Ha Kim (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2017), 7.

²⁹ Pak and Kim, “Introduction,” 8.

³⁰ Layli Maparyan, *The Womanist Idea* (New York: Routledge, 2012), 119.

³¹ Maparyan, *The Womanist Idea*, 4.

Tracing genealogies and histories of womanism as a spiritual movement, Maparyan gathers sources and examples for spiritual activism around the world: Sister Chan Khong, Vietnamese Buddhist nun who led anti-Vietnam War peace activism with Zen Master Thich Nhat Hanh; Immaculée Ilibagiza, Catholic activist against genocide and for post-war healing in Rwanda; Kiran Bedi, who transformed India's largest women's ward, Tihar Jail, to the ashram by teaching inmates Vipassana meditation; Pregs Govender, yoga practitioner and antiapartheid activist in South Africa; and Wangari Maathai, leader of the Green Belt movement in Kenya and recipient of the Nobel Peace Prize, whose world views and spiritual activism are grounded in Kikuyu traditional/cultural ecospirituality and Christianity.³²

Maparyan's five case studies of spiritual activism helps me comprehend spiritual activism from a transnational feminist perspective. First, spiritual activism embraces diverse resources, including organized religions (e.g., Buddhism, Christianity, Hinduism, and Sikhism), ancestral wisdom, and decolonized/retrieved indigenous spirituality. The five women ground their respective spiritual and religious practices in concretely political-economic contexts. By doing this, they focus their spiritual energy on transforming social structures and empathetically embracing others' suffering instead of abstracting spirituality. Since the five women see a self interconnected to all beings, their activism and solidarity work illuminate interstitial integrity. Here, interstitial integrity becomes a form of spiritual activism that brings the spiritual and the material together, and both realms mutually change each other. Transnational solidarity naturally emerges from the notion of interconnectedness.

Second, storytelling is an effective method among spiritual activists to convey their meditation on social injustice, revolutionary visions, and the Sacred. Their stories unfold the core of spiritual activism that endeavors to overcome oppositional politics. Although oppositional politics might be necessary to start a movement, it cannot sustain the movement or protect the activists from anger, self-destruction, and despair. Maparyan argues that "if the politics is not undergirded by a sense of the spiritual, the sacred, it is a dead

³² Maparyan, *The Womanist Idea*, 145-287.

end.”³³ We can think of solidarity as political activism undergirded by a sense of the spiritual for long-term and sustainable practice. Similarly, Alexander states that an oppositional politics “can never ultimately feed that deep place within us: that space of the erotic, that space of the Sacred, that space of the Divine.”³⁴

If spiritual activism is a work of the spirit, storytelling, as part of this activism, is a conscious act of remembering, reflecting on, and rewriting women's critical understanding of the spiritual and the material. Narratives written by transnational feminist activists with honesty, or what Althaus-Reid calls "doing theology out of the closet," create spaces where interconnectedness is imagined and embraced. The activists' agencies are fully known to the audience who can see themselves in the activists' world.³⁵ These spaces reveal the vulnerability, courage, mystery, and ambiguity of human life and God. Experiencing interconnectedness of all creation in interstitial integrity requires a different kind of learning, producing knowledge, and conscientizing social injustice. The stories from Sister Chan Khong, Ilibagiza, Bedi, Govender, and Maathai show how their historically concrete stories are interconnected, crossing different times and spaces, first through the global political economy, and second through the power of spirit (shared spiritual activism). Readers can appreciate this "interconnectedness" by "feeling" their stories. Here, the feeling should be understood as both mental/intellectual and spiritual work—a holistic way of knowing the Sacred through our hearts, minds, and bodies together that subsequently changes our moral perceptions and actions on a personal and collective level. Storytelling in spiritual activism is a method to speak about what cannot be fully conveyed in human language and to take tellers and listeners to a new level of consciousness.

However, it is crucial to scrutinize what stories are repetitively produced and why, and how they are consumed in the neoliberal market. As Mohanty warns, the existence of third world women's narratives in the US academic space and market does not evidence decentering hegemonic histories and subjectivities constructed upon European colonialism and white supremacy.³⁶ Diversifying

³³ Maparyan, *The Womanist Idea*, 4.

³⁴ Alexander, *Pedagogies of Crossing*, 282.

³⁵ Althaus-Reid, *Indecent Theology*, 92.

³⁶ Mohanty, *Feminism without Borders*, 77.

women's narratives in the Eurocentric space of knowledge production may demand more exotic and different stories in which "individual women write as truth-tellers and authenticate 'their own oppression,' in the tradition of Euro-American women's autobiography."³⁷ A division of labor in producing feminist knowledge also happens. Third world women and women of color become memoir writers or producers of embodied knowledge, while white feminist scholars write "high" theories in analyzing women's varied experiences. This state of labor division favors particular stories such as third world women's organized political struggles rather than their everyday life in so-called times of peace. These stories may produce monolithic images of third world women either as victims or as feminist warriors. Mohanty argues that it is significant not just to record one's history of struggle or consciousness, but also to scrutinize how narratives are recorded, namely, how we read, receive, and disseminate such imaginative records.³⁸

Third, with the above cautions from Mohanty, I delineate how to speak in proximity to third world women and other women of color. For instance, Maparyan tells how to ethically relate her womanist knowledge to spiritual activism across the globe by articulating her positionality. Her intellectual, feminist, and spiritual "positionality" stems from her critical consciousness of the spiritual root of womanist activism. From this positionality, Maparyan builds up (imagined) relationships with the five spiritual activists, rigorously using a womanist lens to understand these women's spiritual activism. Through the lens of her concept, Luxocracy, Maparyan arduously makes dialogue between herself and the five women as well as among the five. This imagined dialogue reconceptualizes Luxocracy and simultaneously allows new perspectives on spiritual activism. For example, after having met with Sister Chan Khong at Plum Village and pondering over her book *Learning True Love*, Maparyan states:

Sister Chan Khong's emphasis on peace as her issue of choice, which encompasses both its inner (psychological/spiritual) and outer (political) dimensions, allowed me to move the discourse about womanism

³⁷ Mohanty, *Feminism without Borders*, 77.

³⁸ Mohanty, *Feminism without Borders*, 78.

beyond 'the mantra' of race/class/gender/sexuality and racism/classism/sexism/heterosexism and to highlight the fact that all forms of outer political change are predicted upon inner person change. A big part of womanist social change work involves changing the landscape of the psychospiritual interior. This is done through everyday methods . . . as well as through large-scale political mobilizations and mass media interventions, all of which we see in Chan Khong's work.³⁹

Under a womanist eye, Sister Chan Khong's activism brings womanism into transnationalism rather than Chan Khong's work being converted to a womanist work, even as her peace activism illuminates the womanist "way" or "spirit."⁴⁰ From Maparyan's perspective, womanism does not solely belong to US Black women. Its methods and spiritually grounded vision can be shared and illuminated among non-Black women across the globe. In this way, womanists can move toward transnational solidarity and speak in proximity to global women of color.

Similarly, Black feminist Jennifer Nash argues for Black feminists to imagine intimacy with "both transnationalism and the broader category 'women of color'" by surrendering intersectionality "not as a form of 'defeat' but as the beginning of reimagining black feminist theoretical and political life, as a deep act of generosity that unleashes connections between black feminism and women of color feminism."⁴¹ US academia has created a false dichotomy between intersectionality as US Black feminists' theoretical work and transnationalism as a theoretical frame of non-US women of color, and thus, competition between Black women and so-called global women of color. In many cases, the Black female body represents women of color feminism in the US and the South Asian female body transnational feminism. The false demarcation of Black feminism, transnational feminism, Asian American feminism, Indigenous feminism, and Latina feminism is an example of the colonial legacy of compartmentalization. Re-remembering and exhuming forgotten stories of women of color's international and domestic solidarity, we can overcome the colonial legacy of compartmentalization and see

³⁹ Maparyan, *The Womanist Idea*, 174.

⁴⁰ Maparyan, *The Womanist Idea*, 175.

⁴¹ Jennifer Nash, *Black Feminism Reimagined after Intersectionality* (Duke University Press, 2019), 84.

unequal relations even among compartmentalized groups. Nash imagines radical intimacy between intersectionality and transnationalism both as theories, political movements, and creative projects, without forgetting each other's particular genealogy.⁴² This intimacy, what I call "speaking in proximity," is seen in Maparyan's womanist spiritual activism as well as interstitial integrity.

Transnational Feminist Solidarity in Kwok Pui-lan's Postcolonial Imagination

Spiritual activism as transnational feminist solidarity resonates with the Asian American feminist theo-ethical concept of interstitial integrity. Concluding this essay, I imagine and reimagine transnational feminist solidarity growing out of Asian/American postcolonial feminist theology, particularly from Kwok's postcolonial imagination. As I quote from Kwok Pui-lan at the beginning of this chapter, transnational solidarity is an open door to witness and experience interstitial integrity that is spiritual activism inspired by Asian and Asian American feminist theo-ethics. In light of Kwok's three critical movements of imagination—historical, dialogical, and diasporic—I consider re-remembering and rewriting as a feminist ethic of transnational solidarity.

Kwok states that these movements are not linear but overlapped and interwoven in complex ways.⁴³ The relationship among the three critical movements presents the understanding of "time" as spiral and palimpsestic, just as Alexander conceptualizes palimpsestic time: the rescrambling of "here and now" and "then and there," closing the distance between two or three times.⁴⁴ In this understanding of time, colonialism has traveled through multiple generations, bringing neocolonialism into ideological proximity with neo-imperialism, which accords with one method of timekeeping, Christian neoliberal corporate financial time.⁴⁵ Hence, it is logical that decolonization requires holistic thinking: decolonizing time as a fixed or singular concept. I consider historical, dialogical, and diasporic imagination within this understanding of time and decolonization.

⁴² Nash, *Black Feminism*, 109–10.

⁴³ Kwok, *Postcolonial Imagination and Feminist Theology*, 30–31.

⁴⁴ Alexander, *Pedagogies of Crossing*, 246.

⁴⁵ Alexander, *Pedagogies of Crossing*, 246.

Kwok's historical imagination aims to reconstitute and release the past so that the present is livable. Third-world women's collective and embodied memories are a powerful tool in resisting institutionally sanctioned forgetfulness by the colonial and neo-imperial ruling.⁴⁶ Historical imagination presents third world women as agents of writing and remembering painful history and memory. They find pleasure not only in asserting their individualist sexuality or sexual freedom as found in white bourgeois culture, but also "in the commitment to communal survival and in creating social networks and organizations" so that they and their communities can be healed and flourished.⁴⁷ By exercising historical imagination, we, Asian/Asian American feminist theo-ethicists, can retrieve our communal and historical sources for global peace and justice, and genuinely care about people who retell the stories and memories of decolonizing movements.

As a concept and as a region, the transpacific captures Kwok's dialogical imagination, which critically interrogates the modes and zones of contact between the dominant and the subordinate, or relations of ruling. In her essay, "Fishing the Asia Pacific," Kwok accentuates the importance of transnational collaboration between Asian and Asian American feminist theologians. Unlike the common belief shared in the American public, Asia and America are not two separate entities but are "constantly influencing each other within the broader regional formation of the Asia Pacific."⁴⁸ The Pacific as a concept cannot be separated from European, American, and Asian imaginations or fantasies of economic expansion, domination, a clash between civilizations, exoticized indigenous cultures and women, and military operations. For Asians, the Pacific is unthinkable without remembering European and American imperialism. China and Japan only add Asianized imperialism to the region, while South Korea and Singapore have risen as regional powers, if not sub-empires.⁴⁹ In the meantime, the Pacific invokes

⁴⁶ Kwok, *Postcolonial Imagination and Feminist Theology*, 37.

⁴⁷ Kwok, *Postcolonial Imagination and Feminist Theology*, 37.

⁴⁸ Kwok Pui-lan, "Fishing the Asia Pacific: Transnationalism and Feminist Theology," in *Off the Menu: Asian and Asian North American Women's Religion and Theology*, eds. Rita Nakashima Brock, et al. (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2007), 9.

⁴⁹ Viet Thanh Nguyen and Janet Hoskins, "Introduction: Transpacific Studies: Critical Perspectives on an Emerging Field," in *Transpacific Studies: Framing an Emerging Field*, eds. Viet Thanh Nguyen and Janet Hoskin (Honolulu: University of

imperialist nostalgia among Europeans and Americans—wars, conquest, and endless wealth. The term “transpacific” is the most recent effort at naming this often forced contact zone.⁵⁰ The transpacific requires us to be equipped with a transnational feminist lens to reflect on what is happening to us on American soil that is also happening outside the US. By re-remembering and rewriting (hi)stories, including those of the Sacred, deeply embedded in the transpacific, Asian and Asian American women open entry points to transnational feminist theo-ethics. Through Kwok’s dialogical imagination, I learn not only “the fluidity and contingent character of Asian cultures,” but also the crucial realities of human life marked with transition and pilgrimage which dwell in our identities.⁵¹ Thus, dialogical imagination makes transnational solidarity necessary because we can navigate life’s uncertainties and ambiguities only in contact zones where our identities and cultures are unsettled but interconnected with dissimilar cultures and identities.

Finally, diasporic imagination destabilizes the center and periphery, and recognizes the periphery as the subject of producing critical knowledge of oppression, war, poverty, and forced diaspora.⁵² Kwok introduces “the image of the storyteller who selects pieces, fragments, and legends from her cultural and historical memory to weave together tales that are passed from generation to generation.”⁵³ This image represents what I analyzed as a storytelling method previously. Kwok’s image of the storyteller illustrates a female agent who is accountable to her community and resurges collective wisdom of survival and resistance. Through storytelling and consciously engaging in others’ stories of survival wisdom, a female subject grounds her transnational solidarity. Furthermore, diasporic imagination critically interrogates diasporic subjects’ negotiation of multiple cultures and identities, and inclusion or exclusion of women and sexual minorities from diasporic recordings. Gender is a signifier of power relations in diasporic memories, whereas negotiation with multiple cultures and religions is required to build up transnational solidarity. Kwok’s diasporic imagination beautifully elaborates on interconnectedness:

Hawai’i Press, 2014), 2-4.

⁵⁰ Nguyen and Hoskins, “Introduction,” 2.

⁵¹ Kwok, *Postcolonial Imagination and Feminist Theology*, 43.

⁵² Kwok, *Postcolonial Imagination and Feminist Theology*, 45.

⁵³ Kwok, *Postcolonial Imagination and Feminist Theology*, 46.

“a diasporic consciousness finds similarities and differences in both familiar territories and unexpected corners; one catches glimpses of oneself in a fleeting moment or in a fragment in someone else’s story.”⁵⁴ Diasporic imagination relays Alexander and Mohanty’s definition of the transnational that we consider women in similar contexts rather than all women. Transnational feminist solidarity becomes natural in diasporic imagination, as diverse diasporic subjects see one another in their particular stories, crossing different times and spaces.

These three critical movements of postcolonial imagination necessitate transnational feminist solidarity for global peace and justice and liberative theo-ethics. Simultaneously, the movements show how "my" consciousness is always positioned in the collective and historical psyche of postcolonial women's stories, enabling me to speak in proximity to postcolonial women.

Conclusion

Critically engaging with secular and Christian feminist scholars, this essay constructs transnational feminist theo-ethics as transnational feminist solidarity imagined in light of interstitial integrity. Interstitial integrity, first conceptualized by Rita Nakashima Brock, highlights not only God's image but also Asian/Asian American feminist theo-ethical discourse on transnationalism. Interstitial integrity is unfolded in spiritual activism that emphasizes interconnectedness among all living beings and the inseparability between inner transformation (the spiritual) and outer social changes (the material). Kwok Pui-lan’s postcolonial imagination is pivotal to remember, re-remember, and rewrite postcolonial women’s continued memories of interstitial integrity revealed in transnational feminist solidarity. In times of crises, interstitial integrity reveals itself in survival wisdom accumulated through women's transnational networks of decolonization and liberation from neoliberal capitalism, militarism, and ecological destruction.

⁵⁴ Kwok, *Postcolonial Imagination and Feminist Theology*, 50.

Narrating an Asian American Muslim Theology: Race, Displacement, and Liberation

Martin Nguyen

"I want to propose another trope to signify diasporic imagination. It is the image of the storyteller who selects pieces, fragments, and legends from her cultural and historical memory to weave together tales that are passed from generation to generation."¹

Kwok Pui-lan, *Postcolonial Imagination & Feminist Theology*

At the end of the first chapter of *Discovering the Bible in the Non-Biblical World*, Kwok Pui-lan concludes with a compelling call for a different theological paradigm for the truth:

In the end we must liberate ourselves from a hierarchical model of truth, which posits one truth above many. This biased belief leads to coercion of others into sameness, oneness, and homogeneity, excluding multiplicity and plurality. Instead, I suggest a dialogical model for truth: each has a part to share and contribute to the whole. In the so-called non-Christian world, we tell our sisters and brothers the biblical story that gives us inspiration for hope and liberation. But it must be told with the open invitation: What treasures have you to share?²

I am driven and drawn by a similar imagining of the truth where an array of voices come together to illuminate different aspects of it. The appeal of this re-conception is likely accentuated for me as a Muslim who has always lived in a predominately Christian society, or at least one of White Christian normativity.³

¹ Kwok Pui-lan, *Postcolonial Imagination & Feminist Theology* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2005), 46.

² Kwok Pui Lan, *Discovering the Bible in the Non-Biblical World* (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1995), 19.

³ See Khyati Y. Joshi, *White Christian Privilege: The Illusion of Religious Equality in*

Moreover, the openness of the invitation that lies at the heart of Kwok's call possesses a particular attraction. Indeed, the words, thoughts, and stories that I have gathered here represent my attempt to offer a reply to that generative invitation.

The Particularity of Asian American Muslim Theology

Arguably, Asian American Muslim theology is equal measures particularity and peculiarity. Like *all* theology, it is fundamentally the expression of a person in all of their specificity. As Jung Young Lee articulates, there is an inescapable autobiographical element to theology insofar that our personal narratives form the basis and context from which our individual theologies arise.⁴ The varied circumstances, experiences, histories, privileges, and challenges that we each inherit and inhabit shape and orient our understandings of God, faith, and the world. There is something inescapably personal and local at work in all theology, though sometimes it might seem well masked. In other cases, the particularities of a theology are more pronounced, if not explicitly central to the whole. In the case of Asian American Muslim theology, a specific intersection of identities is being explicitly foregrounded. In fact, each included adjective names a critical site of personal location. Asian American Muslim theology, then, explicitly names my theological horizon—a horizon I believe productively engages with an array of interconnected issues: race, displacement, and liberation.

Before turning to these specific and pressing issues, I first want to address the wider approach that I am taking. This is especially important since Asian American Muslim theology means many things for the many of us who are invested in it. From metaphysical meditations and political critique to poetic and literary endeavors and community organizing, Asian American Muslim theology has expanded in manifold directions, all of which points to the highly personal ways by which it is formed and lived.⁵ Given that, this

America (New York: New York University Press, 2020).

⁴ Jung Young Lee, *Marginality: The Key to Multicultural Theology* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1995), 7. See also contributions in a collection edited by Lee and Peter Phan. Peter C. Phan and Jung Young Lee, eds., *Journeys at the Margins: Toward an Autobiographical Theology in American-Asian Perspective* (Collegeville: The Liturgical Press, 1999).

⁵ The varieties of Asian American Muslim theology are manifold. I offer here only a few select examples. There are a number of scholars publishing primarily in the

exploration of Asian American Muslim theology reflects how I have come to navigate the experiences and histories in which I am intertwined.

With that said, Asian American Muslim theology for me is first and foremost an undertaking of the imagination. The imagination, when well marshalled, allows us to discern the connections and currents that structure our understanding of this life and this world. How the imagination unfolds for each of us, however, varies widely. With respect to Asian American theology, the imagination has been invoked according to many modes and registers: religious, historic, dialogical, diasporic, postcolonial, and otherwise.⁶ For instance,

Euro-American academy, like Zahra Ayubi, Asma Barlas, Aysha Hidayatullah, Ebrahim Moosa, and Najeeba Syeed. There are also faith community leaders writing for predominantly US Muslim congregations, like Yasir Qadhi and Sohaib Sultan. Finally, I would also draw attention to the literary expressions with theological bearing articulated by poets, like Fatimah Asghar and Majid Mohiuddin, writer Haris Durrani, and many other US voices such as those included in anthologies like *Voices of Resistance: Women on War, Faith & Sexuality*. Fatimah Asghar, *If They Come For Us: Poems* (New York: One World, 2018); Zahra Ayubi, *Gendered Morality: Classical Islamic Ethics of the Self, Family, and Society* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2019); Asma Barlas, *Believing Women in Islam: Unreading Patriarchal Interpretations of the Qur'an, Revised Edition* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2019); Haris A. Durrani, *Technologies of the Self: A Novella* (Green Bay: Brain Mill Press, 2016); Aysha A. Hidayatullah, *Feminist Edges of the Qur'an* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014); Sarah Husain, ed., *Voices of Resistance: Women on War, Faith & Sexuality* (Emeryville: Seal Press, 2006); Majid Mohiuddin, *An Audience of One: Islamic Ghazals in English* (Columbia: Olive Media Services, 2001); Ebrahim Moosa, *Ghazālī & the Poetics of Imagination* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2005); Yasir Qadhi, *Lessons from Sūrah al-Kahf* (Leicestershire: Kube Publishing, Ltd., 2020); Sohaib Sultan, *Searching for Wisdom: Ruminations on Islam Today: A Collection of Essays* (Princeton: Muslim Life Program, n.d.); Najeeba Syeed, "Interreligious Learning and Intersectionality" in *Asian and Asian American Women in Theology and Religion: Embodying Knowledge*, ed. Kwok Pui-lan (Palgrave Macmillan, 2020), 171-185.

⁶ See for instance the works of C. S. Song, Kwok Pui-lan, Ebrahim Moosa, Peter Phan, and Jonathan Tran. C. S. Song, *Theology from the Womb of Asia* (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1986); Kwok, *Discovering the Bible in the Non-Biblical World*; Kwok, *Postcolonial Imagination & Feminist Theology*; Moosa, *Ghazālī & the Poetics of Imagination*; Peter C. Phan, "Betwixt and Between: Doing Theology with Memory and Imagination," in *Journeys at the Margin: Toward an Autobiographical Theology in American-Asian Perspective*, eds. Peter C. Phan and Jung Young Lee (Collegeville: The Liturgical Press, 1999), 113-133; Jonathan Tran, *The Vietnam War and Theologies of Memory: Time and Eternity in the Far Country* (Malden: Wiley-Blackwell, 2010). While not a theologian, the writer and ethnic studies scholar Viet Nguyen has also written significantly on the imagination. Viet Thanh Nguyen, *Nothing Ever Dies*:

Kwok speaks of the dialogical imagination that arises from the multicultural, multi-religious exchanges that necessarily emerge out of Asian Christian contexts and experiences. This mode of imagination operating in mutuality seeks “to bridge the gaps of time and space, to create new horizons, and to connect the disparate elements of our lives into a meaningful whole.”⁷ For Peter Phan, the imagination “empowers the theologian to break out of the limits of the past and bring human potentialities to full flourishing.”⁸ He goes on to pair the imagination with memory, stating, “they are the epistemological equivalents of *yin* and *yang*, ever in movement, ever transmuting into each other, ever complementing each other, to capture reality in its wholeness.”⁹ My present concern is with one particular expressive and experiential mode of the imagination: the act of storytelling. Asian American Muslim theology can be understood as the work of narrations or, to invoke the opening epigraph, likened to the weaving together of tales.

While theology is often imagined to be a matter of deep and abstract philosophical reflection, it is also intimately tied to story. After all, storytelling arguably lies at the heart of what it means to be human. James K. A. Smith calls us “narrative animals whose very orientation to the world is fundamentally shaped by stories.”¹⁰ Stories are not meant simply to be heard. They invite their audiences to join and participate in the unfolding at hand. As theologian Choan-Seng Song astutely observes, story “invites us to reflect on the roots of who we are and what we are, what the world around us is, and ultimately who and what God must be. Story is the matrix of theology.”¹¹ The theologies we imagine for ourselves are deeply shaped by the stories we share as integral to who we are and where we are from. Through narratives, we are able to bind ourselves to the past, and from out of the circle of the story, a sense of self can emerge.

Vietnam and the Memory of War (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2016).

⁷ Kwok, *Discovering the Bible*, 13.

⁸ Phan, “Betwixt and Between,” 114.

⁹ Phan, “Betwixt and Between,” 115.

¹⁰ James K. A. Smith, *Imagining the Kingdom: How Worship Works* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2013), 108.

¹¹ C. S. Song, *In the Beginning Were Stories, Not Texts: Story Theology* (Cambridge: James Clarke & Co., 2011), 18.

Storytelling, however, is never a solitary endeavor. It is fundamentally a communal activity and an essential part of social memory. As Jonathan Tran writes, “in sharing stories, in recounting memories, we bring them to the fore, before others.”¹² We are at the same time joining ourselves to others who are similarly drawn into that same circle of listening and sharing. We are transported collectively across time so that memories are made to live again, though in invariably uniquely inflected ways in accordance with our individual experiences.

Narratives also uncover and disclose. Through their imaginative power, stories can reveal avenues, pathways, and connections that we did not see, appreciate, or understand initially. The story can be wielded to offer us renewed drives and new directions. My aim here, however, is not to explore exhaustively the narrative repertoire of Asian American Muslim theology. Rather, I will let storytelling, in all of its personal intimacy, do its work.

The Peculiarity of Asian American Muslim Theology

I have also called Asian American Muslim theology “peculiar” insofar that it names a mode of scholarly engagement that appears new or at least stands in contrast to more “traditional” disciplinary classifications that prevail in the Euro-American academy. In what way can theology be “Muslim” given the strong Christian associations that the term theology has long held in the Anglophone world? How is theology “Asian?” How is it “American?” And what emerges out of their confluence?

How I answer these questions is invariably rooted in the narrative of my own intellectual, religious, and racial formation. My narrative, perhaps like all narratives, was circuitous. For much of my early scholarly career, theology as a field of inquiry existed outside the orbit of my imagination. I was trained instead to carefully read classical Arabic texts, meticulously analyze their social and historical contexts, and remove myself for the sake of “objective” distance. By institutional design, much (though certainly not all) of Islamic studies remains structured and restrained in similar ways. I may have had the opportunity to study with Muslim theologians, but I was not trained necessarily, or perhaps explicitly, by them to *do* theology. My academic encounter with theology, rather, occurred at

¹² Tran, *The Vietnam War and Theologies of Memory*, 168.

a remove. I was an outsider engaging with Christian traditions of theology. With time, however, I found myself articulating my own theological narrative while drawing upon Islamic wellsprings of tradition.¹³ It was under this threshold that more personal and poignant questions arose. What does it mean for me, a child of Vietnamese refugees, born and raised in the imperial US under a banner of colonial Catholicism, to engage in Asian American Muslim theology? What does it mean to occupy and inhabit that capacious, indeterminate, and racialized space of identity that is “Asian American?” What does it mean to do theology as a Muslim from that space?

My understanding of Asian American Muslim theology is scaffolded. My theology rests and builds upon each of the adjectival identities that precedes it. Each named identity does distinctive and integral work that shapes the theological horizon I presently inhabit. My work can be said to rest at their intersection. I will proceed through each of these identity markers in the order that they are named. I do not begin with “Asian,” however, because my beginning lies with an identity that is all too often elided. It is an identity that was a gift given to me by my parents, instilled and fostered throughout my upbringing. It is also an identity obfuscated by that first named identity. Before I was “Asian,” I was Vietnamese.

(Vietnamese) Theology

However I imagine the fabric and form of my theological work today, its threads were spun in a time that precedes me. The start of my story, then, does not begin with myself, but with my father. Over the slow course of four decades, snatches of his story irrupted and emerged into view—fragmentary and reluctant, sometimes repeated, many times unbidden. Then, one day after the birth of my daughter Maryam, my father’s first and only grandchild, I sat down with him to hear what I have come to consider the axial narrative of

¹³ Those encounters resulted in the following: Martin Nguyen, “Modern Scripturalism and Emergent Theological Trajectories: Moving Beyond the Qur’an as Text,” *Journal of Islamic and Muslim Studies* 2, no. 1 (November 2016): 61-79; Martin Nguyen, *Modern Muslim Theology: Engaging God and the World with Faith and Imagination* (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 2019); Martin Nguyen, “Sunni Islam and the Estranged Ideal: The Displaced, the Racially Disenfranchised, and the Islamic Prophetic,” in *Multi-Religious Perspectives on a Global Ethic: In Search of a Common Morality*, eds. Myriam Renaud and William Schweiker (London: Routledge, 2021), 137-148.

his life: the story of the fall. In the fall of Saigon is a story of my beginnings.

It is April 29, 1975. My father, Tâm Nguyễn, a young man of 30 years, has been waiting for days, but no word has come. The world around him is falling apart and still no word has come. Just days ago, rockets slammed into Saigon. The North Vietnamese Army advances with each passing hour. The denizens of the city are now coursing through the streets pressing against every corner, crevice, and gap in desperate search of escape. Even though the city, like the rest of South Vietnam, is in free fall, word of escape has not yet arrived. He has sent his younger brother home in response to the disappointing silence—back to his mother and father and five younger sisters.

It is at this late hour that my father, dutifully garbed in his police uniform, realizes that no firm word will ever come. The US Embassy is shut tight against the desperate mass of humanity pressed against its gates. Despite all the connections and friendships that have been forged over the years with the men who work within, there is no exit strategy for my father and the thousands of others who have worked alongside the Americans throughout the war. Saigon will fall and its denizens will fall with it. A bilious cloud of terror already hangs in the air.

Just the day before, he had been serving as part of the security detail for a South Vietnamese parliamentarian in one of the many transfers of power that was continually sweeping through the city. The government was constantly changing in so many futile attempts to stem the inevitable. Today, however, he does not report in as usual. The second precinct offers no hope. Instead, he and a few others make their way to the first police precinct with its station directly adjacent to the US Embassy.

Seeing the flood of people, driven by equal measures hope and desperation, pressed against the embassy gates, it becomes clear to my father that no Vietnamese will be allowed in, uniformed or not. The sporadic messages blasted out from the embassy stress the impossibility of entry. With conventional access barred, the gathered officers look to the wall separating their station from the embassy. If they are to escape, they will have to scale it. After too many feverish minutes they manage to contact a trusted American within and relay their plan. They will climb. The marines, they plead, must hold their fire. Scrambling, my father finds the locker of a friend and trades his

uniform for civilian clothes several sizes too large. Then, with everything ready—ladder against wall—they ascend one by one, seven policemen and their commanding officer slipping into a compound of ordered chaos. As my father sets foot on the other side, he is buffeted back by a chopper unceremoniously landing in the garden of a felled tamarind tree. Beneath whirling blades and into a storm of dust and debris the men dash—hunched over, hands shielding eyes—to the open belly of the helicopter.

As my father hops aboard the aircraft, a marine onboard aims his firearm at him and shouts over the roar that this flight is not for him. The marine's other outstretched arm points to a waiting room in the distance where some 40 people are now streaming out towards them. In the confusion, my father backs out to let the oncoming crowd on board. Then, as the last evacuee rushes on, he and one of his friends share a look before jumping in to be lifted sky born. In seconds they are high aloft with the chopper darting away from the hemorrhaging mass of Saigon.

As the city that has been his home for the past two decades recedes into the distance, something within him slams shut. This is both an end with finality and a beginning without clarity. When the earth below becomes sea, my father turns to one of the marines and offers him his government-issued pistol. He is a police officer no more. All that is left to him are the ill-fitting clothes on his back and a clutch of papers detailing who he was in a life evaporating before his eyes. This is the story of my father and his flight from war, ruination, and home, to a destination unknown—the second flight of his life.¹⁴

The next day, April 30, 1975, Saigon fell like a star set loose from the heavens. Like falling stars, the fall of Saigon was read in different ways by those who witnessed it. For some it was a mark of wonder and triumph, portending the completion of a long and arduous struggle. For others it was an omen, a mark of the terribleness that had arrived and a sign of things worse still to come. For me it is a figuration of my beginnings, my being, and my becoming. In the chaos of the fall, my father, alongside hundreds and thousands of others scrambled, fought, and fled blindly across the waters to distant shores. Thousands more did likewise only to die in

¹⁴ In 1954, my father's family fled south of the 17th parallel as the country was partitioned between communist North Vietnam and US-supported South Vietnam.

yawning expanses that lay between. In the fall is a terrible demonstration of God's power, mercy, and wisdom at work: . . . *and He holds back the heavens from falling upon the earth except by His permission. Truly God is to humankind the most Compassionate and Merciful.* (Qur'an 22:56).

This is the story that God has written for my father, when the heavens were made to fall. It is the story that the Divine has written for innumerable others. It is a story that brought for many a final ending to this life. For others, it is a story that signaled a dramatic and irreversible turn towards futures that none but God could know. It is a story that would inscribe its way into so many individual narratives of birth and becoming. Indeed, this is the story that God has written into the pages of my being. The chaos that would become the organizing axis of my father's life would wend its way into mine. Although I have never set foot upon the land from which my father fled, Vietnam marks my existence.

The estrangement that is born of the flight of the refugee is a part of my inheritance. Even as a child when the shape of this story was unknown to me, I was formed by its effects. In my corner of central Virginia where I was born and raised, Vietnam became a cultural threshold that I could never fully enter and from which I could never depart. My theology, then, is one indelibly marked by the unseen, in this case the shadow of a Vietnam still smoldering in the embers of memory. This for me is the existential "betwixt and between" described by Peter Phan; the in-betweenness and in-bothness named by Jung Young Lee; and liminality, marginality, and being a stranger invoked by Sang Hyun Lee.¹⁵ As the Prophet Muhammad preached, "Be in this world as if you were a stranger or somebody passing on his way."¹⁶ In the matrix of Islam, the estrangement of the displaced is a site of reflective resonance for those seeking faith.

¹⁵ Phan, "Betwixt and Between," 113-133; Lee, *Marginality*, 29-53; Sang Hyun Lee, "Pilgrimage and Home in the Wilderness of Marginality: Symbols and Context in Asian American Theology," in *New Spiritual Homes: Religion and Asian Americans*, ed. David K. Yoo (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 1999), 218-228; Sang Hyun Lee, *From a Liminal Place: An Asian American Theology* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2010), 1-33.

¹⁶ Abū 'Abd Allāh Muḥammad b. Ismā'īl al-Bukhārī, *Ṣaḥīḥ al-imām al-Bukhārī al-musammā al-jāmi' al-musnad al-ṣaḥīḥ al-mukhtaṣar min umūr rasūl Allāh wa-sunanihī wa-ayyāmihī*, ed. Muḥammad Zuhayr b. Nāṣir al-Nāṣir, 9 vols., (Beirut: Dār Ṭawq al-Najāh, 2002), 8:93, *bāb al-riqāq*.

Asian American Theology

During the course of my life, Asian and American have been markers of identity that have appeared repeatedly together, sometimes conjoined, at other times juxtaposed to one another. My being Asian has largely been an imposition from without. The non-Asian majoritarian society in which I live rarely affords me the dignity of my cultural specificity. My Vietnamese identity is largely disfigured into parentheses. While the gravitational pull of Vietnam will always be present in my life, I am rarely ever seen as “Vietnamese” in the land that became my parents’ new home. In the eyes of others, I am merely Asian. In the US, Asian is an identity of intentional ambiguity. As Frank Wu expresses in his personal reflections, “I alternate between being conspicuous and vanishing, being stared at or looked through. Although the conditions may seem contradictory, they have in common the loss of control. In most instances, I am who others perceive me to be rather than how I perceive myself to be.”¹⁷ More than a matter of skin or geography, Asian identity is a margin where I am relegated so that I make “better” sense for the sake of others. It is a part of a larger pattern (not an aberration) of racial hierarchy and hegemony embedded into the norm and structures of everyday society.¹⁸

While I am made to occupy Asian-ness, I am never allowed to be merely American. As Toni Morrison poignantly articulated, “In this country American means white. Everybody else has to hyphenate.”¹⁹ Never only American, I am categorized instead as

¹⁷ Frank H. Wu, *Yellow: Race in America Beyond Black and White* (New York: Basic Books, 2002), 8.

¹⁸ See Omi and Winant’s understanding of racial formation as a social process. Michael Omi and Howard Winant, *Racial Formation in the United States: From the 1960s to the 1990s, Second Edition* (New York: Routledge, 1994), 55–61.

¹⁹ Toni Morrison first spoke these words on an episode of “Fin de Siècle,” a new documentary series for the television show “Without Walls” that aired in early 1992 on Channel 4 in the United Kingdom. A fuller version of the statement reads: “In this country, American means white. Everybody else has to hyphenate . . . There is a whiteness that is biological, but what I’m talking about is whiteness as ideology, and the first requirement of that ideology is to assume and assert its normalcy.” Hugh Herbert, “Arts: Television – Hot air in the Windy City,” *The Guardian*, January 29, 1992, 34, Gale Academic Onefile: The Guardian. A different version of the statement appeared elsewhere in Morrison’s writings, where she wrote, “American means white, and Africanist people struggle to make the term applicable to themselves with ethnicity and hyphen after hyphen after hyphen.” Toni Morrison, *Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination* (Cambridge, Ma: Harvard

Vietnamese American, Muslim American, or, more often than not, Asian American, since the others demand too much attention and specificity to recognize. As Jennifer DeVere Brody astutely observes, “The hyphen *performs* – it is never neutral or natural.”²⁰ The very grammar of America actively relegates me to my appropriate suborder of national identity.

The narrative of racialization is so strong in the US that my cultural and ethnic identification as Vietnamese and my religious identification as Muslim are continuously overshadowed by the monolith of Asian-ness. Asian American is an identity that survives, if not flourishes, because it is an integral part of the racializing narrative that underwrites, sustains, dominates, and determines the USA. Asian is a category that minoritizes. As Claire Jean Kim argues, to be Asian is to be “racially triangulated” against black and white Americans in a “field of racial positions.”²¹ It is to be the categorical immigrant, the yellow peril, the model minority, the preferred diversity, and the careless carriers of a pandemic all at once.

Moreover, in spite of the bricolage that is Asian American, not all Asians are treated or perceived to be the same. The different histories, socioeconomic contexts, and lifeways of the myriad coethnic communities that constitute Asian Americanness has led to significantly divergent experiences in the US (in addition to a host of external factors).²² Indeed, a hierarchy of ethnic priority is visible

University Press, 1992), 47. Since the quoted statement’s first utterance, the line has been variously reproduced online without citation. For example, see the following: Toni Morrison (@OfficialToniMorrisonAuthor), “‘In this country American means white. Everybody else has to hyphenate.’ Toni Morrison,” *Facebook*, August 24, 2012, <https://www.facebook.com/OfficialToniMorrisonAuthor/photos/a.223075327704683/479801052032108/?type=3&theater>; Toni Morrison (@MsToniMorrison), “‘In this country American means white. Everybody else has to hyphenate.’ Toni Morrison,” *Twitter*, April 3, 2013, <https://twitter.com/mstonimorrison/status/319605083862081536?lang=en>. The twitter account is a fan maintained account.

²⁰ Jennifer DeVere Brody, *Punctuation: Art, Politics, and Play* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2008), 85.

²¹ Claire Jean Kim, “The Racial Triangulation of Asian Americans,” *Politics & Society* 27, no. 1 (March 1, 1999): 106.

²² For example, see the studies done by Mishra or Takaki. Sangay Mishra, *Desis Divided: The Political Lives of South Asian Americans* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2016), 38–48; Ronald Takaki, *Strangers from a Different Shore: A History of Asian Americans, Updated and Revised* (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1998); Bach Mai Dolly Nguyen et al., *The Racial Heterogeneity Project: Implications for Education Research, Practice, and Policy* (ACT: Center for Equity and Learning, 2017), 18–22; Lavina Dhingra Shankar and Rajini Skrikanth, eds., *A Part, Yet Apart: South*

within this amalgamated identity. Even setting aside the particularities of ethnicity or nationality, there are noticeable tensions around representation, influence, and racial position between East Asians, Southeast Asians, South Asians, and Pacific Islanders. For instance, South Asians do not always fit into internal or external perceptions or expectations of so-called Asian America. As Rajiv Shankar notes, many South Asians “think that they must surely belong there [within the Asian American paradigm]. Yet, they find themselves so unnoticed as an entity that they feel as if they are merely a crypto-group, often included but easily marginalized within the house of Asian America.”²³ In having to share a house, so to speak, the frictions and faultlines therein become more pronounced and apparent. It is *as if* Asian American identity were an imposition meant as a means to divide and rule.

At the same time, Asian American identity has the potential to be a source of solidarity, if not liberation, as well. This was the impetus behind Yuji Ichioka’s and Emma Gee’s deployment of the term when they publicly formed the Asian American Political Alliance in 1968.²⁴ Overturning crass and reductive classifications like oriental, Asian American was forwarded to bring together a larger community in solidarity and mutual support. As Mihee Kim-Kort writes:

Asians in Asian America (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1998).

²³ Consider too the impotence of Asian America for South Asian Muslims in the wake of 9/11. Their religious identity was further racialized to the point of eclipsing their identification as Asian. As Selod writes, “the racial classification of Asian does not accurately capture the racial experiences of South Asian Muslims.” Meanwhile, the East Asian majority were left out of Islamophobia’s direct line of fire. Rajiv Shankar, “Foreword: South Asian Identity in Asian America,” in *A Part, Yet Apart: South Asians in Asian America*, eds. Lavina Dhingra Shankar and Rajini Skrikanth (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1998), ix-x; Saher Selod, *Forever Suspect: Racialized Surveillance of Muslim Americans in the War on Terror* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2018), 132; Tahseen Shams, “Successful yet Precarious: South Asian Muslim Americans, Islamophobia, and the Model Minority Myth,” *Sociological Perspectives* 63, no. 4 (2020): 653-669.

²⁴ William Wei, *The Asian American Movement* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1993), 19-21; Daryl J. Maeda, *Chains of Babylon: The Rise of Asian America* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2009), 52; Daryl Joji Maeda, *Rethinking the Asian American Movement* (New York: Routledge, 2012), 9-10.

an interconnectedness exists in our experience because of our current social location in North America . . . I believe that the most effective route toward giving any of these groups a voice is through establishing a genuine unity – not homogeneity – rooted in the tension of acknowledging a similar reception by the dominant culture while simultaneously encouraging the distinctions of each Asian cultural expression.²⁵

Notably, Kim-Kort's allusion to a "dominant culture" points to an important power dynamic at play. Asian-ness is also being marshalled in response to prevailing systems of domination, whether conceived domestically or internationally. Kwok Pui-lan makes this point more explicit when she writes that "Asian" can also signify "a collective consciousness against the theological hegemony of the West and a concomitant affirmation that God's revelation and actions could be discerned through the histories and cultures of Asian peoples."²⁶ Rather than remain a mark of marginalizing racialization, Asian-ness can be reread as a binding principle for organizing, mobilizing, and resisting.

Narration in Asian American contexts works in a similar vein. Storytelling becomes a means for sharing each community's respective histories and memories. It allows us to lay our stories next to one another in order to witness how our experiences are both interconnected and distinct. As Kwok elaborates, "A diasporic consciousness finds similarities and differences in both familiar territories and unexpected corners; one catches glimpses of oneself in a fleeting moment or in a fragment in someone else's story."²⁷ It is precisely this sensibility, born from out of the Asian American experience, that informs my own embrace of narrativity for the work of theology. It is not only to tell my story or even the stories of my family, but to create that needed space in the circle of the story so that the experiences and lives of others might be heard and held. Through the sustained act of shared narrations, we are able to constructively imagine a binding unity without sacrificing individual dignity.

²⁵ Mihee Kim-Kort, *Making Paper Cranes: Toward an Asian American Feminist Theology* (St. Louis: Chalice Press, 2012), xvi.

²⁶ Kwok, *Postcolonial Imagination & Feminist Theology*, 40.

²⁷ Kwok, *Postcolonial Imagination & Feminist Theology*, 50.

From In-Between to a Theology of the After

I have told my father's story, but I also sat with my mother to hear her story. The telling of her tale, however, was markedly different. Where my father could not hold back his words, my mother inclined to brevity and quietness. Throughout my life, her recollections of her life in Vietnam have always been rare. This moment was no different. While her words are few, I am able to glean enough.

At the beginning of May 1954, my mother Liên was born days before the conclusion of the Siege of Điện Biên Phủ. In this protracted military engagement, the colonial forces of the French were soundly defeated by the guerrilla fighters of the Việt Minh who besieged them. It was a stunning triumph that would dramatically transform Vietnam. In the months that followed, the country was partitioned into North and South. My mother emerged in the midst of this tumult as the youngest and last of 10 children in her family. She was born in the northern half of the country, but her time there would be exceedingly brief – far too short for memories to take hold. When she was only four months old, her family fled to the south as the land and its people were reconfigured. Soon resettled in Saigon, my mother would spend the next 20 years of her life living pressed between two terrible conflicts: the French War, whose conclusion accompanied her birth, and the American War, whose expiration would ultimately drive her from her home and whose expiation would provide her with a new life in the US.

In the 20 years in-between, she would lose her father while still quite young. She was only three years old. As a result, her memories of him now are fleeting. The ephemeral image that she holds in her mind is partly born from the scant surviving photographs and the reminiscences of her older siblings. After his death, her mother, a widow, would become the center and anchor of the family for the years that lay ahead. Beyond this loss, what my mother recalls of that interim stretching between two wars is a largely untroubled childhood, sheltered even. As the youngest in her household, she was allowed to let the carefree merry-making of youth occupy her days. When they could afford to there was food, treats, and markets to shop. The joys of youth, of course, did not last.

In the years leading up to 1975, the severity of the times began to crystallize and intrude. Whatever protection that the city of Saigon had been providing her was progressively cut away. The war

cut gravely indeed, but how it cut and how deeply remains undisclosed or purposely unremembered. When I press my mother for details, I am met with a passing but pregnant pause before she moves the story on. There is only energy enough to tell of her escape. What matters is everything that happened afterwards.

As the fall of Saigon became increasingly evident, the signs of the end were everywhere. War had coiled itself around Saigon and its terrible muscles had begun to convulse, constrict, and tighten around its prey. With each strangled gasp that the city managed to take, thousands of terrified inhabitants spilled forth. The docks, roads, and skyways were flush with desperation. The imminence of collapse hung in the air. For my mother's part, her family was able to secure their escape thanks to her brother's employment with Pan Am airlines. Thus, mere days before old Saigon would breathe its last, they cut across the heavens for the distant American territory of Guam. She left Vietnam, never to return, two days before the fall of the city and three days before her 21st birthday. Then, after two disorienting weeks as hastily discharged refugees—still awash with confusion—they were delivered from that remote island territory to the US Marine Corps Base Camp Pendleton in southern California, alongside tens of thousands of others, so that they might grieve and then breathe once again.

All of this, however, is only a small part of her narrative. When I sit to listen to my mother's story, she dedicates most of her time to relating the days and years that emerge in the aftermath, although "aftermath" is the wrong word. That is a term of choice for historians and distant analysts. For her, looking back, it marks a beginning instead. By this point in time, the time of her youth has been eclipsed by the full life that she has lived as an adult since her displacement. My mother may have been wrenched from Vietnam just as she arrived at the threshold of adulthood and a life that could have been, but she also found herself on the other side of something terrifyingly new. Where before she had been the one being formed, in the time after she would have a more active hand in discovering the shape of her future. There were still lessons to learn, experiences to navigate, loves to discover, a family to build, and many other paths to tread in the time after. All of that nurturing, growing, and building, by the grace of God, lay in the promise of the decades ahead. Meanwhile, those first two decades in war-tossed Vietnam slowly and gradually

receded into the quiet walled garden of occluded memories. *God effaces and establishes what He wills . . .* (Q. 13:39).

Muslim Theology in the Silences

As I took in the depth and breadth that my mother's time "after" held for her, another life, hidden by silences, came to mind that has served as a paragon of piety for many Muslim faithful: Hagar, the servant bound to Sarah who bore for Abraham his firstborn son Ishmael. As with my mother and innumerable many others, silences hover over parts of Hagar's life as well. There is, first of all, the seeming silence of revelation. As Barbara Stowasser notes, "If the Qur'anic revelations on Sara are scant, they are almost nonexistent on Hagar."²⁸ Although Hagar's story is part of the larger narrative structure of the Qur'an, she is never named, like nearly all the women mentioned therein, nor is she granted voice.²⁹ Instead her story is told through Abraham and Ishmael. In chapter 14, *sūra Ibrāhīm*, for example, Abraham calls out: *Our Lord! I have settled some of my progeny in a valley without any cultivation by Your Sacred House, so that, our Lord, they might perform the prayer. So make the hearts of some of the people incline toward them, and provide them with fruits, so that they may be thankful* (Q. 14:37). The progeny mentioned here are implied to be none other than Ishmael and Hagar. According to tradition, Abraham accompanied them into the wilderness, but departed for home without them, which is when this supplication is supposedly given. Elsewhere in the Qur'an Ishmael is named and lauded, but this is arguably the strongest reference to Hagar. Then, alone in a barren valley, Hagar faces her son's debilitating thirst. She desperately searches for water between two hills before an angel reveals to her a life-saving spring of water. The Qur'an memorializes this moment, but does so by naming and sanctifying the two hills: *Truly al-Şafā and al-Marwa are among the symbols of God* (Q. 2:158), while Hagar remains unnamed.³⁰

²⁸ Similarly, Celene Ibrahim notes that Hagar is never named explicitly in the Qur'an. Barbara Freyer Stowasser, *Women in the Qur'an, Traditions, and Interpretation* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994), 43; Celene Ibrahim, *Women and Gender in the Qur'an* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2020), 5.

²⁹ The exception is Mary, whose name appears repeatedly. Stowasser, *Women in the Qur'an, Traditions, and Interpretation*, 67–82.

³⁰ Notably, the seven circuits that Hagar traverses in search of water between the hills al-Şafā and al-Marwa are retraced every year by Muslim pilgrims as a special

Despite her muted presence in the Qur'an, a more charitable reading is possible if viewed from a different angle. Hagar's story, unmarked by name or the specificity of voice, becomes, at the same time, a story more easily held and embodied by others. In her story, others can more easily imagine themselves. Throughout human history, the plight of Hagar has been repeated in innumerable variations. A number of contemporary Muslim women, like 'Ā'isha 'Abd al-Raḥmān, Betty Shabazz, amina wadud, Mohja Kahf, and Hibba Abugideiri, have drawn heavily upon her experience.³¹ Their invocations of Hagar point to a wider meaningfulness that her life has had for myriad others. Driven by forces often beyond their control – violence, abuse, instability, terror, and despair – countless people, including my parents, have similarly thrust themselves into the unknown to see what kind of life they might find on the other side. The vast majority, like Hagar, do so unnamed and unacknowledged.

The other silence at work is a silence that covers the other parts of Hagar's life. When her life is invoked, whether in the Qur'an or in the orations of preachers and storytellers, the story that is so-often told is the one alluded to above – the story of Hagar's life *before*: the domestic tensions and undisclosed reasons that drive Hagar and Ishmael from their home, their journey into the wilderness with Abraham, her struggle to survive in the barren valley with only her precious and precarious son, and then her salvation through divine intervention.³² Although the Qur'an discloses only the faintest

rite within the Ḥajj pilgrimage in honor of her trials. Hussein Rashid, "Hajj: The Pilgrimage," in *The Practice of Islam in America: An Introduction*, ed. Edward E. Curtis IV (New York: New York University Press, 2017), 72–73.

³¹ Bint al-Shati' ('Aisha Abdul-Rahman), "Islam and the New Woman," trans. Anthony Calderbank, *Alif: Journal of Comparative Poetics*, 19 (1999): 194–202; Sylvia Chan-Malik, *Being Muslim: A Cultural History of Women of Color in American Islam* (New York: New York University Press, 2018), 116–118; Russell J. Rickford, *Betty Shabazz: A Remarkable Story of Survival and Faith Before and After Malcolm X* (Napierville: Sourcebook, Inc., 2003), xiii–xv; Amina Wadud, *Inside the Gender Jihad: Women's Reform in Islam* (Oxford: Oneworld, 2006), 120–157; Mohja Kahf, *Hagar Poems* (Fayetteville: The University of Arkansas Press, 2016); Hibba Abugideiri, "Hagar: A Historical Model for 'Gender Jihad,'" in *Daughters of Abraham: Feminist Thought in Judaism, Christianity, and Islam*, eds. Yvonne Yazbeck Haddad and John L. Esposito (Gainesville: University of Florida Press, 2001), 81–107. See also Debra Majeed's shared experiences in Rashid, "Hajj," 62, 70–73.

³² The Islamic narratives of Hagar should not be read through a Jewish or Christian interpretative lens. Unlike the biblical account in Genesis, Muslim

contours of this tale, the commentarial literature and the extra-Qur'anic legends that arose in the centuries afterward flesh out this narrative arc.³³ The story is resonant with the biblical account in Gen 21:9-19, even if it assumes a different reality within Islam.

Inspired by my mother's words, which incline so heavily to the *after*, would Hagar not have cherished and would she not have been more eager to relate the life that she built for herself and Ishmael *after* having survived her earlier ordeal? In the *qīṣaṣ al-anbiyā'* literature, or "tales of the prophets," glimpses of that life are given. After the spring of water is miraculously revealed, the solitary Hagar and Ishmael are joined by traveling Arabs from the tribe of Jurhum.³⁴ In their company, Hagar would spend the next few years watching her young son grow and mature into adulthood. With her son beside her, Hagar could finally experience the independence that she could not have had while in the service to Sarah. She would be able to raise her young son Ishmael, helping to form the pious and prophetic adult that he would become. Those years *after* would have been years of renewal and flourishing—a period of life where Hagar would have been building her life. More than that, she would have had a vibrant, leading role in transforming that once barren valley into the thriving settlement that would come to be known as Mecca. It is not inconsequential that Hagar's life in the *after* graces the same ground that would become the axial sanctum to which all Muslim worship would be oriented. I cannot help but imagine, that if Hagar

accounts relate a significantly different unfolding of events. According to Riffat Hassan, "While the biblical narrative in Genesis 21:8-14 tends to leave readers with the impression that Abraham sent Hagar and Ishmael away in order to placate the jealous wrath of Sarah and had nothing more, henceforward, to do with them, the story as told in *Sahih al-Bukhari* shows that Abraham had a continuing relationship with that part of his family." Nonetheless, in these accounts Abraham never explicitly explains to Hagar why they must depart. Riffat Hassan, "Islamic Hagar and Her Family" in *Hagar, Sarah, and Their Children: Jewish, Christian, and Muslim Perspectives*, eds. Phyllis Tribble and Letty M. Russell (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2006), 154.

³³ For example, see al-Ṭabarī, *The History of al-Ṭabarī, Volume II: Prophets and Patriarchs*, trans. William M. Brinner (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1987), 65-76; Muḥammad b. 'Abd Allāh al-Kisā'ī, *Tales of the Prophets (Qīṣaṣ al-anbiyā')*, trans. Wheeler M. Thackston Jr. (Chicago: Great Books of the Islamic World, Inc., 1997), 152.

³⁴ al-Ṭabarī, *The History of al-Ṭabarī, Volume II*, 75; Stowasser, *Women in the Qur'an, Traditions, and Interpretation*, 48-49; Brannon Wheeler, trans., *Prophets in the Quran: An Introduction to the Quran and Muslim Exegesis* (London: Continuum, 2002), 97-98.

were asked about her story, she would not dwell solely on the time before, but would spend much of her time relating the many blessings and stories that emerged in the God-given years that came after.

Narrating Muslim Theology

Narrativity gives shape to faith. It renders faith more tangible as if it were a space to enter, inhabit, and grow. Its importance is evident in storytelling's prominence across many, different circles of Muslim life. The telling of stories, then, should be seen as a central activity of Muslim theology. After all, Muslim theology is as much about living and doing as it is about thinking and believing since the work of Muslim theology is and has always been about how we human beings choose to respond to God in our everyday lives.³⁵ God speaks through revelation and we struggle to respond in our many and varied lives.

Moreover, on numerous occasions God has chosen to disclose God's Self, will, and wisdom through story. *We narrate to you the most beautiful of narratives in what We have revealed to you of this Qur'an . . .* (Q. 12:3). There are the tales and stories throughout the Qur'an that relate the trials and struggles of prophets and pious persons. *Tell them of the account of Abraham* (Q. 26:69); *Mention Mary in the Scripture* (Q. 19:16); *Have you heard the story of Moses?* (Q. 20:9; Q. 79:15); *In this way do We narrate to you some of the accounts of what has come before . . .* (Q. 20:99). Even the biota and abiota of creation gain in intelligibility and meaningfulness when emplotted into narratives and anthropomorphized to lend them personality. That bird of some suspicion, the hoopoe keenly spies for the prophet Solomon.³⁶ Ants give cry and scatter for cover as humans approach.³⁷ Winds are commanded and sent out.³⁸ The heavens, earth, and mountains shrink before great responsibility.³⁹ Hell itself huffs and puffs and cries out hungrily for more.⁴⁰ In such ways are aspects of revelation

³⁵ Nguyen, *Modern Muslim Theology*, 17–20.

³⁶ Q. 27:20–28.

³⁷ Q. 27:18–19.

³⁸ For example, see Q. 7:57; Q. 15:22; Q. 21:18; Q. 25:48; Q. 33:9; Q. 34:12; Q. 35:9; 54:19.

³⁹ Q. 33:72; Q. 59:21

⁴⁰ Q. 67:7; Q. 50:30

brought to life for its human listeners. Narrative and storytelling constitute integral aspects of God's scriptural communication.

Unsurprisingly, how the faithful and faith-seeking respond to revelation possesses strong narrative elements as well. Muslims seek to imitate the life of the Prophet Muhammad through the thousands of remembered reports that have been told and retold across the centuries. The contours of the Prophet's life serve as a model for how Muslims shape and live their own. Additionally, the mechanics of Muslim devotion allow worshippers to join the drama revealed by revelation. Every prayer not only offers the devotee the opportunity to pray as the prophets prayed, but to pray *with* them as well. Every utterance, gesture, and posture of prayer becomes a passageway into the narratives of communities past, especially those involving the struggles of the Prophet Muhammad, his family, and his Companions. Similarly, the Hajj pilgrimage to Mecca allows Muslims to relive episodes from the triumphs and tribulations of Abraham, Hagar, Ishmael, and Muhammad. Pilgrims retrace their revered footsteps and ritually reenact their honored actions as part of a peripatetic narrative arc. These performances of story, however, are not mere imitation. They give new meaning to the stories of the present as well.

In fact, the stories that rest at the core of Muslim theology need not rise solely from the sacred past. The stories of those struggling today have deep bearing as well. The dynamism and timelessness of God's Qur'an becomes more apparent when we are able to see how those same words are spoken, told, and folded into the stories of the living and dying around us. Our sense of the Divine gains in vibrancy when we are able to view it through the narratives we witness, encounter, experience, and engage in the here and now. My own ability to read my parents' respective stories theologically, as I am doing now, only blossomed into its present form as I held and beheld the unfolding life of my daughter. Relevance only magnifies the power of revelation. When Muhammad Shafiq observes that "The Qur'an narrates stories of prophets who were persecuted in their lands and became successful in spreading the message of God [only] after they emigrated," he is envisioning a faith capable of engaging the global crisis of mass displacement and migration.⁴¹ In

⁴¹ Muhammad Shafiq, "Immigration Theology in Islam," in *Strangers in This World: Multireligious Reflections on Immigration*, eds. Hussam Timani, Allen G.

similar fashion, we can imagine the dispossession of Hagar, the exilic journey of the tribes of Israel, and the flight of the Prophet Muhammad's persecuted Meccan community as prescient narratives to interweave and engage with the stories of today's globally displaced and racially disenfranchised, and as an arc to emplot how to faithfully resist, dismantle, and overturn the structures of oppression that created and perpetuate these conditions.

In fact, the inclusion of the Divine in the telling of the story is of crucial importance for the work of theology. While stories may be told by innumerable storytellers, God remains the "Author," so to speak, of all our life narratives. Just as God is the Creator of existence and the Legislator of all affairs, so too do all stories originate with the Divine. To narrate Muslim theology, then, is to enfold the workings of the immanent and transcendent God into the tellings we effect, even if the how of it is indirect and subtle. From an Asian American Muslim vantage, the need to assert the presence of the Divine feels all the more pressing given the US context where secularity and White Christian hegemony are so muscularly embedded. These same systemic forces weave their own nativist tales of besiegement, "embattlement," and the loss of a quintessential "American way of life" that are ceaselessly told to reinforce the prevailing regime of xenophobia and white ethnocentrism.⁴² It is precisely against such human structures of supremacy that the narratives of revelation need to be laid forth. Even when the direst of tales unfolds, Muslim theology should work to remind that the wisdom and righteousness of God remain at work and that God's eternal and omnipresent word continues to speak to those in the midst of struggle.

Conclusion

As Grace Lee Boggs wrote near the end of her life, "*How we tell these stories - triumphantly or self-critically, metaphysically or dialectically - has a lot to do with whether we cut short or advance our evolution as human beings.*"⁴³ It is precisely in the exchange of

Jorgenson, and Alexander Y. Hwang (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2015), 95.

⁴² Khyati Y. Joshi, *White Christian Privilege: The Illusion of Religious Equality in America* (New York: New York University Press, 2020), 83, 87-88.

⁴³ Grace Lee Boggs, *The Next American Revolution: Sustainable Activism for the Twenty-First Century* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2012), 79.

stories that experiences are heard, bonds are discovered, built, and affirmed, and a community learns to dream together. It is out of such exchanges that truth gains in clarity and acquires its gravitational force for all those involved. It is difficult, then, to imagine how the particularities of our person can be set neatly aside. How rootless and vacuous would theological work become if we failed to account for the stories that we each bring, unconsciously or not, to such undertakings? My work in Muslim theology is too tightly interwoven with the other threads of my being. They constitute a committed whole. To do theology, then, is to do so as a Vietnamese American Muslim joined to a larger Asian American imaginary that is oriented to overturning and cultivating the uneven ground of this world. I am drawn to the stories of the displaced and racially marginalized because of the experiences of my community and my family, myself included. These stories, when told, reveal the matrices of power at work that require unmaking. They also, in their exchange and telling, sow the seeds of community and play an important role in the larger and longer struggle for liberation.

Likewise, I feel deep resonances with the similarly-spirited tales told by revelation and my faith's remembered tradition. In these narratives are a promise and path to follow. While the life of Hagar served as the primary religious narrative for reflection, many other narratives could have been told with equal fruitfulness. How they are told and to what end determines their theological efficacy. To narrate Asian American Muslim theology, then, at least in my view, is to allow the stories of revelation and tradition to address, confront, haunt, honor, and encompass the multitude of stories we have lived and continue to tell today. Does not the story of Umm Salama, when her child is violently separated from her during their flight from Mecca to Medina, speak to the trauma of many migrants and refugees at so many borders?⁴⁴ Does not Moses' upbringing in and then prophetic break from the household of Pharaoh address the liberatory possibilities of our own complicity with forms of structural oppression? Whether in the face of personalized wickedness or systemic evil, revelation reveals that faith and righteousness prevail. Indeed, in the wide expanse of Asian

⁴⁴ Ibn Ishāq, *The Life of Muhammad: A Translation of Ishāq's Sīrat Rasūl Allāh*, trans. A. Guillaume (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1967), 213–214; Martin Lings, *Muhammad: His Life Based on the Earliest Sources* (Rochester, VT: Inner Traditions International, Ltd., 1983), 113.

American Muslim theology, many intimate exchanges are possible where the Divine itself might vigorously irrupt into life to hear, hold, and render real the hopes and dreams born by the marginalized, the oppressed, and the most vulnerable. In the face of human supremacies, God, greater than all, shall remain with and deliver those in need, either in this life or the after, or so our stories go.

*Exploring a Transnational Practical Theology:
Learning from Kwok Pui-lan*

Boyung Lee

Introduction

At my first debriefing with 15 students after our two-week, human-rights accompaniment visit in Colombia, we sobbed together in the middle of our seminary dining hall. We wept at the huge cognitive dissonance we experienced between the brutal injustices we had witnessed in Colombia and the privileges we had living in Berkeley, California. In Colombia, we saw horrendous human rights violations against the mostly Afro-Colombian farmers who had been displaced multiple times from the lands their families had inhabited for centuries. Some of them witnessed multiple killings of their loved ones who had resisted forced displacements by armed paramilitaries that were hired by multinational corporations closely tied to Colombian political leaders. Day after day, we heard from displaced people, Colombian activists, and international companions about people losing their farmlands to multinational companies like Del Monte and Chiquita Bananas. Coca-Cola blocked their access to water and required they buy drinking water in plastic bags, and they watched their confiscated homes and lands covered with Argos Cement debris to prevent them from rebuilding their lives. They suffered from constant threats of displacement and mysterious illnesses after Drummond Company started open-pit mining in their neighborhood. Angry at these and other neoliberal US companies, we were charged with fighting for and with them and with making a sincere covenant that we would be in solidarity with them despite our geographical distances. However, when we returned to our homes in California, we were confronted by the neoliberal global capitalist reality we had been immersed in all along. The dining hall of our progressive seminary in Berkeley was stocked with Chiquita bananas, Del Monte goods, and Coca-Cola products that we

consumed every day, including times we gathered to plan strategies for our social justice movements. The dining hall was probably built with Argos Cement and heated by Drummond Company fuel. As we became aware of these invisible connections and complicities, we grieved our realization that we were the very people who fought to gain justice even as our idealism was at the cost of somebody else's justice, a tragedy that Nami Kim interrogates.¹

It was a moment when I, a practical theologian, recommitted myself to the development of transnational practical theological discourse in a field where the word transnational is not a familiar or welcomed concept. Practical theology is a discipline that produces new knowledge through dialectic movements between theories and contexts. Contextually informed theories and theologically reflected practices constantly interact with each other for mutual improvement and new knowledge production for changing times. There are various schools of thought in practical theology that differ primarily by how each school interprets the correlation of theories and contexts. However, when one closely observes the debates among practical theologians on the relationship between the two, one quickly notices that the meaning and nature of the context itself have hardly been examined. Courtney Goto, in her book, *Taking on Practical Theology*,² asserts that the reason for the lack of definition and discussion is rooted in the taken-for-granted white normative frame of reference, which is too universal and basic, and thus does not need explanation. Goto and a few scholars have recently been examining how practical theology perpetuates colonial and white normativity by not interrogating many white value-laden paradigms.

This essay argues that beyond challenging Eurocentric notions and white normative concepts, practical theologians must understand the transnationally entangled nature of our contexts and practices, as my students and I experienced in the world of global neoliberalism we inhabited unaware. As a way of exploring transnational practical theology, I first critically examine how context is understood in practical theology following Kathleen

¹ Nami Kim, "My/Our Comfort Not at the Expense of Somebody Else's: Toward a Critical Global Feminist Theology," *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion* 21, no. 2 (November 2005): 75-94.

² Courtney Goto, *Taking on Practical Theology: The Idolization of Context and the Hope for Community* (Leiden, The Netherlands: Brill Publication, 2018).

Cahalan's categories. Then, I explore what practical theology would look like with insights from the work of Kwok Pui-lan, who has been a leading voice of transnational Asian American feminist theologies.

The Context in Practical Theology

To have a clear overview of context in practical theology, it is crucial to understand how practical theologians have defined the meaning of practice, which is inseparable from contexts where practices occur. For this, the work of Kathleen Cahalan is very informative. In her article, "Three Approaches to Practical Theology, Theological Education, and the Church's Ministry," Cahalan describes three prevailing practical theological models: (1) Fundamental Practical Theology, (2) Christian Practices in Practical theology, and (3) Liberating Praxis in Local Contexts.³ Among these three approaches, after briefly summarizing the first approach, I will focus on her second and third categories because they are the dominant two models that show how most practical theologians understand the meaning of practice and context.

Cahalan's first category, Fundamental Practical Theology, is exclusively focused on the work of Don Browning, a critical figure in contemporary practical theology. Influenced by the Frankfurt school and hermeneutical theories of Paul Ricoeur, Hans-Georg Gadamer, and Habermas, Browning was keen on the practical nature of knowledge and more interested in exploring the nature of theology as a fundamentally practical discourse than in defining practical theology per se. Browning believed that what society believes as knowledge and truth is a form of practical wisdom developed over time through integrations and relationships in various everyday communities. The practical concerns, questions, and issues of life arising from secular and religious communities drive, motivate, and shape theology at every level.⁴ Therefore, the task of every theology—regardless of its focus on theoretical, historical, or practical dimensions—is fundamentally practical. When the existing framework no longer makes sense of new realities, the responsibility of theologians and pastors is to examine them and provide substantial responses considering both secular

³ Kathleen A. Cahalan, "Three Approaches to Practical Theology, Theological Education, and the Church's Ministry," *International Journal of Practical Theology* 9 (2005): 64–94, <https://doi.org/10.1515/IJPT.2005.005>.

⁴ Cahalan, "Three Approaches to Practical Theology," 68.

and sacred traditions and knowledge. Browning calls the dialectic task that considers both new realities and existing traditions a movement from “present theory-laden practice to a retrieval of normative theory-laden practice, to the creation of more critically held theory-laden practices.”⁵ In other words, for Browning, it is fundamental that theology, which is situated in a pluralistic world, pays attention to both religious and social practices and engages with both “believing and non-believing publics.”⁶

Cahalan criticizes Browning’s fundamental practical theology for lacking theological dimensions. He neither provides theological interpretations on key concepts he uses, including practice, nor makes connections between concepts of God or Christianity and practices. For example, she says, “[t]he trajectory of practical thinking is toward the common good of society and therefore extends beyond any one community or ecclesial tradition. Because he spends considerable time explaining how the community engages practical reason toward a social ethic, he fails to explain in theological terms God’s relationship to practical reason.”⁷ Browning fails to argue for why and how practical theology should engage transformative work for the common good, while other disciplines, including secular discourse, can do the same job.

Cahalan’s second category of practical theology is what she calls Christian Practices in Practical Theology. Since the mid-1990s, this has been the most popular and dominant approach embraced by most mainline Protestant practical theologians in North America. This approach emphasizes a set of Christian practices aiming at sustaining and strengthening people’s identity as Christians, which is an important departure from Browning’s discourse.⁸ The rise of the Christian practice approach overlapped with the US Protestant church’s desire to improve its vitality and influence in society, but churches have been experiencing a steady decline for decades. As a strategy for revitalizing the church, mainline Protestantism has focused on forming the people “through voluntary, embodied

⁵ Don Browning, *Fundamental Practical Theology: Descriptive and Strategic Proposals* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 1996), 7.

⁶ Don Browning, “A Practical Theology,” in *Building Effective Ministry: Theory and Practice in the Local Church*, ed. Carl S. Dudley (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1983), 222.

⁷ Cahalan, “Three Approaches to Practical Theology,” 89.

⁸ Cahalan, “Three Approaches to Practical Theology,” 74.

commitment to reclaimed and often recontextualized traditional practices of the church.”⁹ While Browning was interested in theological practices and ethical positions for social transformation that integrate religious and secular insights, the Christian Practices approach emphasizes the character formation of Christians through embodied and faithful practices. This approach has been represented by the Valparaiso Project on the Education and Formation of People in Faith, directed by Dorothy Bass and supported by the Lilly Foundation under the leadership of Craig Dykstra. It has published several widely read books like *Practicing Our Faith: A Way of Life for a Searching People*,¹⁰ which guides people to live centuries-old Christian practices to develop a renewed sense of identity and a way of life that might lead to a Christian community with others on a similar path.

Practices for Bass and others who use this approach mean a way of life based on virtuous habits and wisdom that have been honored and lived by Christians throughout history. Bass, in her 2004 interview with the *Christian Century*, defines practices as:

Practices are the things people do together over time that shape a way of life. One of the short definitions of practices is “embodied wisdom”: a certain knowledge of the world is embodied and engendered by the way we go through our daily lives . . . In *Practicing Our Faith* we talk about practices that address fundamental human needs: honoring the body, hospitality, household economics, saying yes and saying no, keeping Sabbath, testimony, discernment, shaping communities, forgiveness, healing, dying well and singing our lives. Because these practices grow out of our basic needs, all human communities must engage in them in one way or another. The practices become Christian when they’re lived in light of and in response to God’s active presence for the world in Christ.¹¹

⁹ Katherine Turpin, “The Ambivalent Legacy of Practice in Faith Formational Literature” (paper presentation, 2018 Annual Meeting of the Religious Education Association, Washington, D.C., November 3, 2018), 2.

¹⁰ Dorothy Bass, ed., *Practicing Our Faith: A Way of Life for a Searching People* (Hoboken, NJ: Wiley and Sons, 1997).

¹¹ Dorothy Bass, “A Way to Live,” interview by Trudy Bush, *Christian Century*, February 23, 2004, <https://www.christiancentury.org/reviews/2004-02/way-live>.

Regarding this definition and understanding, Turpin notes that it is an inevitable and attractive one for US mainline Protestantism, where socialization into Christian faith is getting much harder due to decreasing participation in church life interlocked with a steady and rapid decline in membership.¹² Guiding people through intentional spiritual practices immersed in the Christian tradition provides a different way for faith formation and identity development. An essential role of practical theology is to pass down critically reflected practices of age-old traditions to the next generation, which informs renewed theoretical frameworks for Christian faith formation for a new time.

Cahalan asserts that such an understanding of practice is greatly influenced by Alasdair MacIntyre's ideas about social practices and traditions in *After Virtue*.¹³ In fact, in many writings by the scholars in this camp, the following quote from MacIntyre is used as a basis for their work:

By a practice I am going to mean any coherent and complex form of socially established cooperative human activity through which goods internal to that form of activity are realized in the course of trying to achieve those standards of excellence which are appropriate to, and partially definitive of, that form of activity, with the result that human powers to achieve excellence, and human conceptions of the ends and goods involved, are systematically extended.¹⁴

In contrast to Plato's utopia, where humans become the beholder of the good itself as we emerge from the cave of culture, MacIntyre, who tries to recover the Aristotelian notion of virtue and character, believes virtues are learned habits that are formed through participating in the practices and vision of a community we live in.¹⁵ He mourns that modernity's emphasis on individualistic

¹² Turpin, "The Ambivalent Legacy of Practice in Faith Formational Literature," 5.

¹³ Cahalan, "Three Approaches to Practical Theology," 74; Don Richter, "Religious Practices in Practical Theology," in *Opening the Field of Practical Theology: An Introduction*, eds. Kathleen Cahalan and Gordon Mikoski (Lanham: Rowman and Littlefield, 2014), 204.

¹⁴ Alasdair MacIntyre, *After Virtue*, Second ed. (Notre Dame, IN: Notre Dame University Press, 1997), 187.

¹⁵ Chris Higgins, "Worlds of Practice: MacIntyre's Challenge to Applied Ethics," *Journal of Philosophy of Education* 44 (2010): 250.

utilitarian morality made it less possible for communities to form the character of their members through shared practices of communal values.¹⁶ We hear many practical theologians echoing MacIntyre's lament.

Cahalan's third category of practical theology is Liberating Praxis in Local Contexts. She describes this school as "theologians who take seriously the *situation described and the question posed* by radical postmodern theology," who "are not 'death of God' theologians but they have certainly pronounced the death of the White-male European theologically-constructed God" by taking concrete local culture as a primary site for doing theology.¹⁷ This approach is still a small and rising voice in the field of practical theology where the Christian practice approach is prevailing. Interestingly, Cahalan puts liberation theologians, including feminist, Latin American, African American, African, and Asian theologians, and contextual theologians into this category. She lists several distinctive features of this approach: (1) challenging the false universality of European male-dominated theological traditions; (2) asserting the radical historicity and culturally conditioned nature of Christian faith and life; and (3) accepting the concrete and locally conditioned manifestations of religion as the theologian's point of contact.¹⁸ Practical theologian Richard Osmer calls this approach "The Transforming Praxis Trajectory of Practical Theology," one rooted in liberation theology influenced by the critical social theory of Marxism but which is now being replaced by the poststructural philosophies of Michel Foucault and Pierre Bourdieu.¹⁹ Like Cahalan, Osmer names for representative scholars only white practical theologians of postmodern thought and white feminist constructive and practical theologians, many of whom use Pierre Bourdieu's notion of practice and habitus to frame their approach.

Like MacIntyre, Bourdieu also presents the idea of habitus, but he uses it to connect concepts like social ordering and cultural capital

¹⁶ Higgins, "Worlds of Practice," 247. Also see Richard Osmer, "Empirical Practical Theology," in *Opening the Field of Practical Theology: An Introduction*, eds. Kathleen A. Cahalan and Gordon S. Mikoski (Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 2014), 69.

¹⁷ Cahalan, "Three Approaches to Practical Theology," 81.

¹⁸ Cahalan, "Three Approaches to Practical Theology," 82.

¹⁹ Osmer, "Empirical Practical Theology," 67-68.

to analyze the unequal power dynamics of a society that serves domination. He sees power as culturally and symbolically created and constantly re-legitimized through an interplay of human agency and social structure. This happens through the habitus of a society that guides and shapes acceptable behavior and thinking patterns within a given social structure.²⁰ Loïc Wacquant, a French American sociologist and a scholar of Bourdieu, summarizes the Bourdieusian notion of habitus as:

‘the internalization of externality and the externalization of internality,’ that is, the way society becomes deposited in persons in the form of lasting dispositions, or trained capacities and structured propensities to think, feel, and act in determinate ways, which then guide them in their creative responses to the constraints and solicitations of their extant milieu.²¹

A society’s dispositions that members consciously and unconsciously practice are shaped by its history and structures and simultaneously shape their current practices and structures. As tools of habitus that justify hierarchical and unequal social practices and structures, Bourdieu describes the notion of cultural capital beyond economic means and areas of life, or “fields.” He asserts that people’s minds internalize and accept so-called “normal” social practices and hierarchy through cultural capital like education, language, judgments, values, methods of classification, and everyday life activities.²² They gradually and unconsciously accept social differences, including unequal systems and structures in different fields of their lives, such as their networks and relationships where members mutually reinforce the taken-for-granted systems and social practices. At the same time, depending on the fields they are in at a given time, people experience power differently, and thus they sometimes resist the dominant power and structure, and other times are complacent. In sum, Bourdieu argues that there are no value-neutral and power-equal practices. A society’s habitus is formed through shared practices by its members

²⁰ Pierre Bourdieu, *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste* (London: Routledge, 1984), 171.

²¹ Loïc Wacquant, “Habitus,” in *International Encyclopedia of Economic Sociology*, eds. Jens Beckert and Milan Zafirovski (New York: NY: Routledge, 2011), 318.

²² Bourdieu, *Distinction*, 471.

within unequal structures and reinforces the system that serves the interests of the dominant.

Turpin, who is categorized as a representative of liberationist practical theology, raises concerns about the Christian Practice in Practical Theology's framing of religious practice. Utilizing Bourdieu's concept of habitus, she criticizes its positive approach to renewed faith formation because it reinforces mainline Protestantism's white-centered metanarratives and practical theological discourse.²³ Instead, she invites her colleagues to take seriously the knowledge production they engage in concrete social structures that are saturated with dominating power. She insists that practical theologians must consider how contexts mediate our knowledge of God and Christian traditions.²⁴ She also warns her fellow white practical theologians that without critical self-examination, practical theology can perpetuate white supremacy.²⁵

Cahalan, a key player in Christian Practices in Practical Theology, acknowledges the challenges posed by the Liberating Praxis in the Local Context approach. She emphasizes that practical theologians need to acknowledge the culturally conditioned nature of Christian practices and the importance of justice for the common good. She says that of the three approaches she categorized, the liberation approach has done the most to engage the full range of theology as a whole, and that "raising the 'prophetic' as a fundamental practice of every Christian will be the legacy of liberation theology."²⁶ Despite her affirmation, however, she is rather pessimistic about the future trajectory of the liberation approach. She notes:

At times, liberation theology becomes inaccessible and far from concrete when it spends most of its time in a deconstructive position. Many stop listening not only because the critique becomes all too familiar, but also because concrete strategies for particular communities remain unspecified. Most communities cannot overthrow the entire system of oppression and prejudice overnight.

²³ Turpin, "The Ambivalent Legacy of Practice in Faith Formational Literature."

²⁴ Katherine Turpin, "Liberationist Practical Theology," in *Opening the Field of Practical Theology* (Lanham: Rowman and Littlefield, 2014), 165–67.

²⁵ Turpin, "The Ambivalent Legacy of Practice in Faith Formational Literature," 12.

²⁶ Cahalan, "Three Approaches to Practical Theology," 91.

Liberation theologians need to be more attentive to helping people figure out local strategies to work at over time that can finally bring down systems. The kind of change that most liberation theologians seek, however, will take generations of faithful Christian practice.²⁷

Her lack of understanding of liberation theology, its purposes, and its practical strategies is evident from the above, and her problematic assessment reveals where many practical theologians are in their own practice contexts, seeing liberation as deconstruction. Liberation theologians problematize the hegemonic power embedded in social, cultural, and religious structures that serve the interests of the dominant group and advocate for theology from the perspectives of the oppressed. They demand the dominant group theologians be conscious of what Bourdieu calls reflexive sociology, through which people, particularly the dominant group, recognize their biases, beliefs, and assumptions, and join the work to de-universalize their particularities. Without critical self-reflection, changing or renewing practices alone can hardly bring liberation, even if practical theologians advocate justice.

As mentioned above, the Christian Practices in Practical Theology approach is the prevailing model, and the impact of the liberation approach is still minimal. For a prime example, take the recent textbook, *The Opening Field of Practical Theology*, which presents a classic example of an essentialist, racist, and orientalist approach to practical theology. It includes just three chapters authored by “invited” racial-ethnic scholars who were tasked with writing about their entire racial/ethnic group’s distinctive approach to practical theology: Asian American Practical Theology, African American Practical Theology, and US Latino/a Practical Theology. The rest of the book is filled with chapters by white theologians who write about different themes in practical theology. At the panel on the book during the 2014 American Academy of Religion meeting, the editors acknowledged the problematic nature of such an approach. They thanked Courtney Goto, a young and pre-tenure scholar at that time who authored the Asian American Practical Theology chapter, for helping them be aware of the issue, which resulted in adding a chapter on white practical theology. Having an intentional chapter on white practical theology might be a forward

²⁷ Cahalan, “Three Approaches to Practical Theology,” 92.

step, but without a critique of white hegemony embedded in its self-consciousness, it will likely just permit some theologians to continue their “value-free” research.

The field of practical theology, which supposedly takes both theoretical studies of faith and informed practices of faith in communities seriously, has been debating the nature of the relationship of the two and the identity of practical theology for a long time, a debate overwhelmingly based on dominant white experiences. The field has hardly explored how theories and practices, and practitioners and scholars, are formed and informed in specific cultural, social, economic, and political contexts. In her book, *Taking on Practical Theology*, Goto names such an approach as the idolization of context, which assumes that context is an object thing waiting to be discovered by a value-free researcher.²⁸ She identifies three ways the idolization of context has been done: “presupposing and investigating universals, revealing the ‘natives,’ and recruiting insiders.”²⁹ Goto notes that it is a mistake to believe that, possessed of the requisite skill and cleverness of white normative standards, practical theologians can peel back layers of unconscious privilege and socialization to excavate the pure context from which they develop informed practice theories for all.³⁰ This approach also inevitably treats the subjects of their research as native informants, a familiar tool of colonization and white supremacy. Goto’s assessment is similarly summed up by Willie Jennings, an African American constructive theologian, in his recent book, *After Whiteness*:

Whiteness invites us to imagine that we become visible to ourselves and others only through its narration of our lives . . . [Europeans] imagined they could see the peoples of the world better than the peoples of the world could see themselves, and that their insight was key to forming institutionalizing processes that were crucial to global well-being . . . Western education and modern theological education were formed in this condition without entering into lament over its harmful effects; indeed, we became the means through which untold generations were shaped to

²⁸ Courtney Goto, *Taking on Practical Theology* (Leiden, The Netherlands: Brill Publication, 2018), 143.

²⁹ Goto, *Taking on Practical Theology*, 273.

³⁰ Goto, *Taking on Practical Theology*, 143.

think inside these troubled forms of gathering and the facilitating obsession of whiteness with its relentless need to perform its indispensability.³¹

Practical theology is a field rooted in unexamined whiteness, which has been precisely the means for malforming minoritized and marginalized people and their contexts.

To move practical theology in a more just direction, Goto challenges her fellow practical theologians to have “prophetic tactics,” a term she coined by merging Walter Brueggemann’s idea of prophetic imagination and Rey Chow’s notion of tactic.³² Practical theologians must become tactically insiders and outsiders by challenging the dominant paradigm that prevents people from recognizing how oppressive systems and theologies in the name of a white norm have harmed people.³³ Her “prophetic tactics” are rooted in her lived experiences as an Asian American woman of Japanese heritage who lives with an in-between and beyond identity. She is also inspired by Asian American scholars who use translocality and transnationality to capture the realities and contexts of Asian American lives. For example, she uses Fumitaka Matsuoka’s notion of translocality,³⁴ which means being multi-conscious among competing and contradictory ways of looking at reality, to frame her suggestion for practical theologians to be conscious insiders and outsiders of the dominant paradigm.³⁵

This prophetic tactic approach begins to destabilize Eurocentric practical theology and creates spaces for developing an alternative approach, particularly a transnational practical theological model. In Goto’s challenge to practical theology’s entrenched normative white colonial paradigm, she reveals the taken-for-granted assumptions embedded in white ideological and cultural contexts. However, in our neoliberal global context, destabilizing white normativity without considering transnationally entangled contexts—as my students and I found in Colombia—is still a limited approach. Even liberation theologians from the first

³¹ Willie James Jennings, *After Whiteness: An Education in Belonging* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing, 2020), 137.

³² Goto, *Taking on Practical Theology*, 59.

³³ Goto, *Taking on Practical Theology*, 59.

³⁴ Fumitaka Matsuoka, *Learning to Speak a New Tongue: Imagining a Way that Holds People Together: An Asian American Conversation* (Eugene, OR: Pickwick, 2011), 4.

³⁵ Goto, *Taking on Practical Theology*, 104.

world can wittingly and unwittingly perpetuate global oppressions; if we do not consider how we are also transnationally interconnected in our local contexts, we will continue to remain oblivious to the harm we inflict on people in the Global South. Therefore, as an initial step beyond challenging white normativity and moving toward a transnational practical theology, I believe the work of Kwok Pui-lan offers important insights in asserting that, with Christian demographics shifting to the Global South, it is no longer optional, but utterly necessary for theological educators to broaden our students' horizons to global contexts and issues in our teaching.³⁶

Exploring Transnational Practical Theology: Learning from Kwok Pui-lan

The solidarity-based relationship my students and I sought to build with the poverty-stricken, displaced people we met in Colombia is complex. It requires a multifaceted analysis of how neoliberal global market economics, coupled with contemporary American and European imperial policies, work in the Global South. During our visit to Colombia, we witnessed daily exploitation, displacement, and human rights violations by transnational companies from the Global North, often enabled by the Colombian government's silence and policies that are explicitly and implicitly required by Global North countries. The flux of migrants from south of the US border is intertwined with economic and foreign policies that favor companies in the US. What shocked us the most was our unintentional contributions to indescribably oppressive life situations of our new friends, just through simple daily food consumption and mundane living activities. We came away with a keen realization that social justice work in our local context must be done with a global consciousness and analysis and through transnational solidarity.

The transnational oppression we witnessed in Colombia is not rare. Similar or worse human rights violations and oppression of people are happening throughout the world in underdeveloped countries for the interests of Global North companies and governments. For example, labor exploitation in export-processing zones in the Philippines, sexual violence by soldiers deployed to US

³⁶ Kwok Pui-lan, "Teaching Theology in a Global and Transnational World," *Religious Studies News*, March 15, 2014, <https://rsn.aarweb.org/spotlight-on/theoed/transnational-character/theology-global-world>.

military bases in Okinawa and Guam, and radiation poisoning by US nuclear test sites in the Marshall Islands, are among countless locations throughout the Pacific region and Asia. North is here less geographical and more about geo-political economics that intertwine, subtly and largely invisibly, the intimate life contexts of US residents with overseas exploitation. The economic, geopolitical, military, and epistemological entanglements between the US and Asia are inscribed together, perpetuating US racial capitalism both at home and abroad.³⁷ Transnational oppression is not just a problem between Global North and South countries, but a phenomenon happening among countries with different hegemonic relationships throughout the world. Russia's utilization of oil supply to continue to control the former Soviet Union (FSU) countries in Central Asia and Eastern Europe, such as Ukraine, is a well-known example. With the growing agricultural fields ironically gained by climate change, Russia is now weaponizing its wheat supply as an added means to control the FSU and African countries.³⁸ Another case in point is China's abuse of human rights and forced labor in Tibet: thousands of Tibetan rural laborers are forced into military-style training centers where they are turned into factory workers of Chinese companies. The examples of China and Russia's transnational oppression further points to the importance of transnational theological approaches. In Asian contexts, Kuan-Hsing Chen, a Taiwanese scholar of cultural studies, asserts that even within Asia, a critical transnational approach based on de-colonization, de-Cold War, and de-imperialization is necessary in the neoliberal global economy.³⁹

Regarding such phenomena, Kwok says that this reality destabilizes the assumed white middle-class notion of "home," a symbol of a white normative view of context:

³⁷ Yèn Lê Espiritu, Lisa Lowe, and Lisa Yoneyama, "Transpacific Entanglements," in *Flashpoints for Asian American Studies*, ed. Cathy J. Schlund-Vials (New York: Fordham University Press, 2018), 175–76.

³⁸ Clara Summers and Sherri Goodman, "Weaponizing Wheat: Russia's Next Weapon in Pandemic and Climate Eras," *Georgetown Journal of International Affairs* 21 (Fall 2020): 62–70, 10.1353/gia.2020.0014.

³⁹ Kuan-Hsing Chen, *Asia As Method: Toward Deimperialization* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2010).

“home” cannot be read through the myopic lens of the warmth and comfort of the private sphere without taking into consideration how the private intersects with national identity, ethnicity, citizenship, law, and women’s rights. In the global scene—where war, violence, ethnic strife, political instability, the global market combine to drive many people into homelessness, migrancy, and diaspora—home is not a fixed and stable location but a traveling adventure, which entails seeking refuge in strange lands, bargaining for survival, and negotiation for existence. Such a destabilized and contingent construction of home dislodges it from its family domestic territory and questions the conditions through which the cozy connotations of home have been made possible and sustained.⁴⁰

Putting this “new” reality in an Asian American feminist theological context, Kwok argues that a transnational approach is even more demanded for theologians than ever. For her, a transnational approach is to treat the realities of US and Asian societies as overlapping and interlocked, and thus not limited by nationality, citizenship, geographical locations, and essentialized cultural characters, but “speaking within Asia and in between Asia and North America.” Doing feminist theologies as Asian Americans is then to “occupy different positions, sometimes mutually reinforcing and other times contesting, in the vast flow of ideas, peoples, cultures, and histories of the transnational Asia Pacific.”⁴¹

Concretely, transnational feminist theories and practices critically examine how globalization and neoliberal capitalism affect people across nations, genders, races, classes, and sexualities beyond critiquing white Western models and paradigms from intersectional perspectives.⁴² They draw from postcolonial theories, which reveal how colonial projects continue to shape people's social, economic, and political oppression across the globe. They explore an alternative system through solidarity and collaboration of feminists

⁴⁰ Kwok Pui-lan, *Postcolonial Feminist Imagination and Theology* (Louisville, KY: Westminster/John Knox Press, 2005), 102.

⁴¹ Kwok Pui-lan, “Introduction,” in *Asian and Asian American Women in Theology and Religion: Embodying Knowledge*, ed. Kwok Pui Lan (Cham, Switzerland: Palgrave Macmillan, 2020), 7.

⁴² M. Jacqui Alexander and Chandra Talpade Mohanty, eds., *Feminist Genealogies, Colonial Legacies, Democratic Futures* (New York: Routledge, 1997), xviii.

around the world.⁴³ They point out that the transnational approach to context is not optional but a must for practical theologians who claim to bridge between theory and practice and between the academy and the church.

It is time for practical theologians to note that the definition of “context” in practical theology, even for white Americans, is nostalgic and seriously limited and limiting. “Home” for many is transitory and provisional, as the recent film *Nomadland* depicts, or it is dangerous, unstable, and fraught with trauma. The rise in opioid addiction, poverty, and gun violence, and the lowering of life expectancy for the American white population is a sign that it may be drifting toward something closer to the Global South as globalization has exported most of the jobs that once made the context for churches in Christian Practices in Practical Theology possible. The dominance of that approach for so long while churches declined and closed has made the field seriously out of strategies and ideas for an increasingly globalized, technological, environmentally threatened, post-colonial world.

Kwok Pui-lan, who has been a leading voice in transnational, postcolonial feminist theologies, urges educators to rethink what and how to teach if they want their teaching to make sense to people living in a transnationally entangled world. She offers the following pedagogical principles she has learned over the years,⁴⁴ which are essential for practical theologians who want to approach their research and teaching with transnational contexts and consciousness in mind:

(1) Recovering multiple traditions in Christianity

From its beginnings, Christianity has been a pluralistic tradition with different theological schools of thought developed in various cultural contexts. However, many scholars teach Christian theologies exclusively through Western cultures, ideas, and practices. Christian theologians, particularly practical theologians, who seek to bridge theories and practices embodied in various contexts, must study Christianity’s diverse cultural homes, including those outside of the western world. Changing the paradigm of current practical theological approaches must be done

⁴³ Chandra Talpade Mohanty, *Feminism Without Borders: Decolonizing Theory, Practicing Solidarity* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2003).

⁴⁴ Kwok, “Teaching Theology in a Global and Transnational World.”

to disrupt the white Western dominance paradigms for the sake of de-colonial, post-colonial, and de-imperial forms of Christianity.

(2) Teaching cross-culturally

With this principle, Kwok emphasizes two critical issues for teaching. First, students from various cultural contexts must be encouraged to engage with one another so that a teacher's approach does not impart privilege to one culture, which is either his/her/their own or the majority of the students in the class. Teachers should promote opportunities for students to reflect on their heritage and the theological assumptions embedded in them. This process helps white students to understand the particularity of their taken-for-granted views that perpetuate western colonial white normativity. It also allows students from different minoritized communities to be aware of the hierarchy of oppression created by the divide-and-conquer tactic of the dominant group and to work toward an alternative paradigm through solidarity across boundaries instead of a competitive paradigm that grants justice for their communities at the expense of other oppressed communities.

Another consideration for teaching cross-culturally is the teachers' authority, especially those of us from minoritized communities. A minoritized instructor from a Global North country is still in a highly privileged position within a global and transnational context, especially in a classroom context. Scholars of color from the US academy cannot and must not insist on being victims of oppressions alone. When contextual power differences are not examined both within the classroom and beyond, the possibilities for transnational solidarity work are diminished for addressing the larger neoliberal capitalist system.

(3) Paying attention to the empty chair

In the US theological context, Kwok highlights that "those of us teaching in predominantly white schools need to be especially vigilant regarding the fact that our classroom does not reflect the majority of people in the world nor the changing racial composition in the US." Therefore, even when other minoritized voices are not present, we need to pay attention to the absence of presence in the room—of the empty chair. Instructors must ask and help students learn to ask whose presence is missing and find ways to "make extra effort in exposing themselves to diverse theological frameworks and take creative steps in addressing epistemic colonialism and

institutional racism.” Often, instructors teaching in a dominant white context make excuses because they do not have readily available textbooks to use, despite their best intentions. I suggest they expand the boundaries of their understanding of the textbook. Works in other fields beyond theological and religious studies and “living” texts from missing voices should be regarded as equally essential textbooks.⁴⁵

(4) Adopting a comparative mode of teaching

Christianity has always existed in an interconnected and religiously pluralistic world; yet, the way Western Christianity posits itself has always been in hegemonic relationships with other religions. Younger generations and immigrants with roots outside Christianity reject Christian claims of superiority in a religiously plural world, which is regarded as one of the crucial reasons for Christianity’s decline. The transnational and global context provided by technology, education, and migration means new generations have access to relationships with and knowledge of other faiths that undermine Christian claims of superiority and its collusions with colonialism and US capitalism.

In this era of global information sharing, our world needs religious leaders who engage with leaders of other religions to build coalitions and solidarity. To enact this, Kwok suggests teaching Christian theologies in comparative ways. She argues that “insights from other traditions can often illuminate our blind spots and lead us to ask new questions. The teaching of theology needs to break through the mono-cultural and mono-religious captivity.”⁴⁶ This is a critical message for practical theology, especially for the prevailing Christian Practices Approach that aims at the revitalization of the church through the formation of the people with renewed Christian practices. People who are ignorant of what other religions are practicing would not know what makes their practices distinctive and may even discover some are more effectively utilized in other traditions outside the confines of their church’s particular practices.

⁴⁵ See my earlier works on the topic for more detailed ways to expand textbooks: “Broadening the Boundary of ‘Textbooks’ for Intercultural Communication in Religious Education,” *Religious Education* 105, no. 3 (Summer 2010): 249–252; “When the Text is the Problem: A Postcolonial Approach to Biblical Pedagogy,” *Religious Education* 102 (Winter 2007): 4461.

⁴⁶ Kwok, “Teaching Theology in a Global and Transnational World.”

(5) Revamping the theological curriculum

The US theological curriculum as a whole needs serious reexamination in the context of the world. The current model is based on the nineteenth century German model based on Friedrich Schleiermacher's design of theological studies, which was revolutionary at the time,⁴⁷ but such a narrow cultural context has long been untenable. Even as the model lingers in theological education, with its white normative assumptions and hierarchies of disciplines, transnational theological curricula and pedagogy have moved far beyond just critiquing and destabilizing white normative assumptions. They are transcultural, global, interreligious, dialogical, interdisciplinary, and integrative of gender, race, sexuality, and class discourses and practices in global contexts. Local justice and injustice issues are interwoven with invisible others in the world, sometimes at the cost of their entire livelihood as my students and I have witnessed in Colombia.

Conclusion

Transnational practical theology is a mandate for all practical theologians who claim to bridge theory and academy with the church and practice. The revitalization of Christianity for the twenty-first century, a task that most practical theologians have embarked on, will not happen without de-idolizing the context. It requires taking the transnationally entangled context seriously to move beyond merely destabilizing its embedded white normativity. As various recent statistics on America's religious landscape show, many youth and young adults leave churches that do not walk their talk and are indifferent to social justice.⁴⁸ Transnational practical theology is a critical way to address concerns raised by young people about the long-lived hypocrisy of the church and academy. For transnational theology founded on decolonial and solidarity-based approaches, Kwok emphasizes a comparative approach to gain insights from other cultures and religions, while engaging critical self-examination to undo harms inflicted by western white normative Christianity. In the field of practical theology, unearthing

⁴⁷ Friedrich Schleiermacher, *Brief Outline of Theology as a Field of Study*, trans. Terrence N. Tice (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2011).

⁴⁸ Michael Lipka, "Why America's 'Nones' Left Religion Behind," *Fact Tank News in Numbers*, Pew Research Center, August 24, 2016, <https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2016/08/24/why-americas-nones-left-religion-behind/>.

white normativity is still new, and thus, the first step toward a new paradigm is perhaps to be challenged and learn from other theological works, particularly from Kwok Pui-lan's transnational, political, and postcolonial theologies.

***Reorienting Orientalism in Asian/American Theology:
"Religion," Christian Secularism, and Islamophobia***

Nami Kim

Uncovering a Lacuna in Asian/American Theology

When I started writing this chapter on a “future” of Asian/American theology for a book that honors and celebrates Kwok Pui-lan’s contribution to the field of theological/religious studies as a scholar, teacher, and mentor, COVID-19 was declared as a global pandemic. In the midst of a pandemic, hundreds of thousands of people under the banner of Black Lives Matter have taken to the streets across the US to demand justice for the killings of George Perry Floyd, Jr., Ahmaud Marquez Arbery, and Breonna Taylor, to name only a few, by police and white vigilantes. Despite a pandemic, people’s protests against White supremacy, anti-Black racism, and policing have spread across the country as well as around the world. I had to pause and ask myself again what it would mean to envision a “future” of Asian/American theology in this social and political milieu in which the people’s persistent uprising is coupled with a global pandemic that has exposed the existing inequities that cannot be repaired by a few actions of social reform. What would a “future” of Asian/American theology look like? Will there be a “future” of Asian/American theology at all?

As has been documented, various minoritized groups, including Asians and Asian/Americans, began to critically engage Christian theological discussions and movements in the late 1960s and early 1970s by challenging dominant Euro-American theology. What is called Asian/American theology, a contextual theological discourse, has grown into its present state through the work of multi-generations of theologians who seek to reflect on “the plurality and heterogeneity of the experiences and realities of the people who

constitute a group called Asian American.”¹ Imagining a “future” of Asian/American theology in part requires probing its ongoing relevance. Asking its relevance then entails examining lacunae or voids in the current configuration of Asian/American theology. This essay seeks to articulate what might have been insufficiently addressed or omitted in an Asian/American theology that strives to be relevant, critical, and transformative.

While there are many other important matters that should be of concern for Asian/American theology, this essay seeks to reorient the discussion of Orientalism in ways that integrate issues concerning “Islamophobia,”² defined as anti-Muslim racism and a hostility towards Islam, by drawing from Kwok Pui-lan’s landmark *Postcolonial Imagination and Feminist Theology*. Published in 2005, this is the first book-length exploration of postcolonial feminist theology. Although Kwok’s book does not investigate Islamophobia as such, her postcolonial theology of religious difference invites discussions on several interrelated topics: Orientalism, the concept of religion, Christian secularism, and gender, which is at the center of the secularism debates that reinforce Islamophobia. I contend that

¹ Nami Kim, “Collaborative Dissonance: Gender and Theology in Asian Pacific America,” *Journal of Race, Ethnicity, and Religion* 3, no. 2 (January 2012): 4.

² For definitions of Islamophobia, see Jasmin Zine, “Anti-Islamophobia Education as Transformative Pedagogy: Reflections from the Educational Front Lines,” *The American Journal of Islamic Social Sciences* 21, No. 3 (2004); Stephen Sheehi, *Islamophobia: The Ideological Campaign against Muslims* (Atlanta: Clarity Press, 2011); Nathan Lean, *The Islamophobia Industry: How the Right Manufactures Hatred of Muslims* (Pluto Press, 2012); Carl Ernst, ed., *Islamophobia in America: The Anatomy of Intolerance* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2013); Todd H. Green, *The Fear of Islam: An Introduction to Islamophobia in the West* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress, 2015); Erik Love, *Islamophobia and Racism in America* (NYU Press, 2017); Khaled A. Beydoun, *American Islamophobia: Understanding the Roots and Rise of Fear* (University of California Press, 2018). For the category of “Muslim,” see Sylvia Chan-Malik, “‘Common Cause’: On the Black-Immigrant Debate and Constructing the Muslim American,” *Journal of Race, Ethnicity, and Religion* 2, no. 8 (May 2011): 1–39; Love, *Islamophobia and Racism in America*; Beydoun, *American Islamophobia*; among others. In her book *Islamophobia, Race, and Global Politics*, Nazia Kazi also addresses the difficulty of finding appropriate language to describe a vast global population of Muslims. See Nazia Kazi, *Islamophobia, Race, and Global Politics* (Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2018). As some scholars have pointed out, discussions on Islamophobia in the US can be limited, if not completely inadequate, if they do not address anti-Black racism against Black Muslims. The discussion on the connection between Islamophobia and anti-Black racism is beyond the scope of this essay. See Love, *Islamophobia and Racism in America*; and Beydoun, *American Islamophobia*.

reorienting Orientalism can facilitate different theological conversations and engagement among Asian/American theologians in the larger context of continuing US War on Terror, including the discussion of “Christian secularism,” in which Islam is posited as incompatible with many features of the modern Western society, including “Euro-Americanness.”³ To be clear, my aim is not to review recent academic debates about Orientalism, secularism, and Islamophobia. It is beyond the scope of this essay to detail such debates, which are extensive. Instead, my purpose here is to highlight several central ideas and arguments in Kwok’s postcolonial theology of religious difference that signal the possibility of engaging Islamophobia as a concern to reckon with in Asian/American theology.

Who is Doing and Engaging Asian/American Theology?

A quick note on the usage of the terms of Asian/American and Asian/American theology is necessary. I use the term Asian/American with the signifier slash “/” between “Asian” and “American” to indicate that the boundaries constructed between “Asian” and “American” are not definite nor clear-cut.⁴ It also denotes the ongoing challenge with the limits of the narrative of inclusion and of citizenship rights, which are based on the power of the nation-state. The usage of the slash does not completely avoid the problems associated with the contested term “Asian American.” Nevertheless, acknowledging the fluid boundaries between the two terms can assist theologians of Asian descent to critically engage discourses and narratives that show what Sunera Thobani calls the “singular focus on immigration as the originary issue,”⁵ a focus that erases the genocide of Indigenous people and the enslavement of Black people while also overlooking the complicity of

³ See Mehdi Semati, “Islamophobia, Culture and Race in the Age of Empire,” *Cultural Studies* 24, no. 2 (March 2010): 267.

⁴ See David Palumbo-Liu, *Asian/American: Historical Crossings* (Palo Alto, CA: Stanford University Press, 1999), 1. I use “Asian American” when I refer to the existing field of Asian American Studies and Asian American Studies scholars.

⁵ Sunera Thobani, “Navigating Colonial Pitfalls: Race, Citizenship, and the Politics of ‘South Asian Canadian’ Feminism,” in *Asian American Feminisms and Women of Color Politics*, eds. Lynn Fujiwara and Shireen Roshanravan (Seattle, WA: University of Washington Press, 2018), 159.

Asian/Americans in reinforcing White settler colonialism and anti-Black racism. Neither the identity of Asian/American nor the definition of “theology” is fixed and inevitable. With this in mind, the term “Asian/American theology” in this essay echoes what Mary Foskett calls “the discursive network of multiple Asian American scholarly voices.”⁶ As much as Asian/American scholarly voices are multiple and diverse, Asian/American theology as the discursive network reflects such multiplicity and heterogeneity in its methodologies, theoretical frameworks, themes, and scopes, as well as in its audience. Defining Asian/American theology itself will remain an ongoing task as it is related to multiple, heterogeneous histories involving war, colonial legacy, US militarism, migration, neoliberal capitalist exploitation, trade, settlement, racism, racialization, transnational connections and networks, and cross-racial as well as transpacific solidarity, all of which co-exist.

This cautionary note on the usage of the term Asian/American also prompts the question of who we expect to read and engage Asian/American theology in general and Asian/American feminist theology in particular. I find Kwok’s response to a similar question helpful. Asking, “for whom is postcolonial feminist theology written?”, Kwok says that the readers are “likely to be an ‘imagined community’, made up of intellectuals interested in the relation between theology and empire building and having the commitment to subvert the use of sacred symbols to oppress people.”⁷ Those readers, as Kwok lists, may include theologians, religious studies scholars, postcolonial critics, and interested Christians. Likewise, this essay is written for anyone who is interested and invested in engaging Asian/American theology with the understanding of our co-constitutive lives, histories, and struggles alongside the commitment to bring a better, livable world.

Reorienting Orientalism

In his article, “September 11: Farewell, My Birthday,” Robert Ji-Song Ku sharply criticizes Asian American studies scholars for not

⁶ Mary F. Foskett, “Historical Criticism,” in *T & T Clark Handbook of Asian American Biblical Hermeneutics*, eds. Uriah Y. Kim and Seung Ai Yang (London, UK; New York, NY, US: T & T Clark, 2019), 110.

⁷ Kwok Pui-lan, *Postcolonial Imagination and Feminist Theology* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2005), 148.

integrating terms such as Palestine, Israel, or Zionism when they evoked “Orientalism” in their scholarship. Ku unapologetically states, “This is not only inexcusable, it is outright criminal. To not talk of Palestine or Zionism in any discussion of Orientalism is to not talk, say, of the ‘sign’ in Saussure’s *Course in General Linguistics* or ‘immigrant’ in Lisa Lowe’s *Immigrant Acts*.”⁸ Asking how Asian American studies has been able to focus on the discourse of Orientalism “without acknowledging two of its primary signifiers, Palestine and Zionism,” Ku relates what he calls “typically Asian Americanist practice of excising and detaching the question of Palestine from the discourse of Orientalism” to the pervasive absence of Arabs and Muslims in Asian American studies until after 9/11.⁹ Sunaina Maira and Magid Shihade agree with Ku by stating that while Orientalism has been a central framework in Asian American studies, it has been taken on without seriously engaging Zionism, Palestine, Israel, and the US policy in the Middle East.¹⁰ Arguing for the need to link Asian American studies and Arab American studies, Maira and Shihade contend that it is critical to connect “anti-Zionism in the context of Middle East politics to anti-racist and anti-imperialist movements in the U.S. and Asia,” which would extend “theories of Orientalism to the actual historical conditions of colonialism in which Said’s theory was embedded.”¹¹

While Asian Americanists have shown an interest in Palestine, Rajini Srikanth rightly points out that it was after the declaration of the War on Terror by the Bush administration that Asian Americanists began to emphasize Palestinian rights.¹² For instance, the Association of Asian American Studies (AAAS) has addressed the subject of Palestine in its annual conferences in 2003, 2005, and

⁸ Robert Ji-Song Ku, “September 11: Farewell, My Birthday,” *Amerasia Journal* 27, no. 3 (2001): 253.

⁹ Ku, “September 11,” 253.

¹⁰ Sunaina Maira and Magid Shihade, “Meeting Asian/Arab American Studies, Thinking Race, Empire, and Zionism in the U.S.,” *Journal of Asian American Studies* 9, no. 2 (June 2006): 129.

¹¹ Maira and Shihade, “Meeting Asian/Arab American Studies,” 130.

¹² Rajini Srikanth, “Asian American Studies and Palestine: The Accidental and Reluctant Pioneer,” in *Flashpoints for Asian American Studies*, ed. Cathy J. Schlund-Vials (New York: Fordham University Press, 2018), 132–133. In this essay, Srikanth also mentions Robert Ji-Song Ku’s critique as well as a “mega-panel” on the subject of Zionism organized by Maira at the AAAS conference in 2005. Srikanth, 139.

2007, respectively, and the 2005 special issue of *Amerasia Journal* was on Orientalism and the legacy of Edward Said, who passed away in 2003. Though there were some controversies and repercussions, AAAS was the first academic organization that adopted a resolution supporting the Boycott, Divestment, and Sanctions movement against the Israeli government in 2013.¹³

May we pose a similar question to Asian/American theology? To what extent have Asian/American theologians integrated the subjects of Zionism, particularly Christian Zionism, and US foreign policy in the “Middle East,”¹⁴ including the US stance on the Israeli occupation of Palestine and, more recently, on Syria and Yemen, into our scholarly discussions? One of the noteworthy and enduring contributions made by Asian/American theology is to debunk the binary construction of “Asia” (read East Asia) as the Other in contrast to the West, and to contest the orientalist rendering of “Asian/American” (read East Asian/American) subjectivity and experiences, which has been linked to persisting anti-Asian (read East Asian) stereotypes, biases, and discriminations in the US. As in pre-9/11 Asian American studies, however, discussions of Christian Zionism, Palestine, Islamophobia, and White settler colonialism have not garnered much attention in Asian/American theological discourse. For instance, despite widespread subscription to Christian Zionism in conjunction with the popular trip to Israel under the banner of “pilgrimage to the Holy Land” among Asian/American Christians, Christian Zionism has, with only a few exceptions, rarely been discussed in Asian/American theology.¹⁵ Nor have anti-racist and anti-imperialist movements in the US and Asia been discussed in connection to anti-Zionist struggles in the Middle East in Asian/American theology. Though there is some variance within Christian Zionism, it is a combination of political

¹³ Srikanth, “Asian American Studies and Palestine,” 133.

¹⁴ As some scholars have pointed out, the term “Middle East” (aka West Asia) is a contested phrase. While the term “West Asia” poses the question of who and which regions should be “included” in “Asia,” I use the term “Middle East” in this essay primarily because it is commonly used by Asian American studies scholars and others when referring to the region.

¹⁵ Nami Kim and Wonhee Anne Joh briefly mention Christian Zionism in relation to Christian hegemony. See Nami Kim and W. Anne Joh, “Introduction: Asian/Asian North American Feminist Theologies,” *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion* 31, no. 1 (Spring 2015): 114.

ideology and a Christian belief that supports the modern state of Israel against Palestine and other “enemies” based on the conviction of God’s unwavering covenant with Israel. Christian Zionism is Islamophobic because it posits Islam as inherently violent and oppressive, and Muslims as threats to the existence of the state of Israel. Discussing the connection between Christian Zionism, Islamophobia, and US evangelical Christian support of the state of Israel, Andrea Smith contends that not only is Islam racialized, but also that Christianity becomes “synonymous with whiteness” in Christian Zionism. According to these racializing logics, the existence of Palestinian Christians is also erased.¹⁶

To be clear, pointing out the lack of attention to these matters is not to criticize Asian/American theology for focusing primarily on the construction of “Asian” (read East Asian) as “oriental” and its theological implications. As Lisa Lowe has argued, Orientalism needs to be conceptualized as “heterogeneous and contradictory,” rather than as a “monolithic, developmental discourse.”¹⁷ Maryam Khalid also says that Orientalism can be applied “beyond the historical context” on which Said’s book was immediately focused.¹⁸ And there are new terms like “American Orientalism” and/or “neo-orientalism.” Thus, it is not my intention nor the purpose of this essay to critique a certain way of discussing Orientalism as problematic. Instead, I am suggesting we redirect our attention to Orientalism in Asian/American theology in ways that include addressing the Islamophobia that undergirds the aforementioned issues. Reorienting the discussion of Orientalism in relation to Islamophobia in Asian/American theology is warranted for at least three interrelated reasons.

First, Orientalism cannot be discussed without addressing “Christianity” and “Islam.” As Gil Anidjar claims, there is no Orientalism “without Christianity, nor without Islam (or Judaism).”¹⁹ Anidjar continues that the “privileged agent of

¹⁶ Andrea Smith, “The Racialization of Religion: Christian Zionism, Islamophobia, and Imperial Peace,” *Journal of Race, Ethnicity, and Religion* 1, no. 13.3 (December 2010): 3.

¹⁷ Lisa Lowe, *Critical Terrain: French and British Orientalisms* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1991), 4–5.

¹⁸ Maryam Khalid, “Gender, orientalism and representations of the ‘Other’ in the War on Terror,” *Global Change, Peace & Security* 23 (2011): 17.

¹⁹ Gil Anidjar, “Secularism,” *Critical Inquiry* 33, no. 1 (Autumn 2006): 52–77, 72.

Orientalism” was Christianity, or more precisely, “Western Christendom.”²⁰ Christian supremacy was underpinned by the Orientalism that constructed Islam and Muslims as inferior to Christianity and White Christian peoples, respectively. Regardless of how Asian/American theology has used the framework of Orientalism previously, it will need to grapple with Islamophobia because Islam is “at the center of the Orientalist imagination.”²¹ However, this is not to suggest that Orientalism and Islamophobia are the same or interchangeable concepts. Regarding the relationship between Orientalism and contemporary Islamophobia, Todd Green argues that while Orientalism provided “the building blocks” for Islamophobia through such notions that Islam, as a “monolithic” religion, is “separate from and inferior to the West,” and that its followers constitute a “racial category,” the two are not homogeneous concepts.²² Instead, Orientalism and Islamophobia can be best understood as “overlapping phenomena, both historically and conceptually.”²³

Second, the category of “Asian/American” includes not only Black Asians,²⁴ but also South and Southeast Asian/Americans, some of whom have become the primary targets of Islamophobia regardless of their religious identity or affiliation, especially since 9/11.²⁵ In other words, there is no way Asian/American theology can avoid engaging the issue of Islamophobia because it directly affects the “Asian/American” constituency. The overlooking of Islamophobia means the failure to account for the multiple and heterogeneous experiences of Asian/Americans. Furthermore, reorienting the discussion of Orientalism can bring attention to the

²⁰ Anidjar, “Secularism,” 58.

²¹ Anidjar, “Secularism,” 73.

²² Todd H. Green, *The Fear of Islam: An Introduction to Islamophobia in the West* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress, 2015), 98–99.

²³ Green, *Fear of Islam*, 99.

²⁴ xoài phạm, “Ending Anti-Blackness Needs to Be a Top Priority for Asian Americans – Here’s Why,” *Magazine: Everyday Feminism*, February 20, 2016, <https://everydayfeminism.com/2016/02/ending-anti-blackness-asian/>.

²⁵ Erik Love argues that confining the discussion of Islamophobia to the “post-9/11” era “obscures the long history of racial discrimination affecting Arabs, Muslims, Sikhs, South Asians, and others in the US. In fact, discrimination that would today be called ‘post-9/11’ Islamophobia has thrived in one form or another in the US since at least the seventeenth century.” Love, *Islamophobia and Racism in America*, loc. 204–209, Kindle.

ways in which “racialized Others,” be they “East Asian/Americans,” “South Asian/Americans,” and/or “Muslim/Arab Americans,” are rendered as an “enemy” or a “foreign threat” to the nation-state whenever a “national exigency” or so-called national crisis demands the defining of a “problem.” The Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882, the Internment of Japanese/Americans during World War II, the post-9/11 anti-Muslim hostility, and xenophobic anti-immigration policy and practices in the US history in general, and particularly under the Trump administration, exemplify such attempts both historically and currently.

Third, the recent reescalation of anti-Asian (read anti-East Asian) racism across the US and in other Western countries during the COVID-19 pandemic has prompted some Asian/Americans to compare anti-Asian racism with hostility towards Muslims and/or Arab Americans²⁶ in the post-9/11 context by connecting the ordeals experienced by Asian/Americans to those of Muslim and/or anyone who “looks” Muslim. Someone has even remarked that “a new wave of Sinophobia” that has been instigated by the pandemic is “the new Islamophobia.”²⁷ If any “comparisons” are to be made between these groups of people, then it seems inevitable that Asian/American theology should be concerned with Islamophobia and the ways it affects Muslims and those perceived as Muslims both on systematic and individual levels. Better yet, a “relational” approach that can show the ways in which the recent re-intensification of anti-Asian racism and the persistent orientalist rendering of Asian/Americans are connected to the current manifestation of Islamophobia as anti-Muslim racism in the larger context of US imperialist militarism seems much needed. What follows touches on some of the key ideas in Kwok’s postcolonial theology of religious difference as they relate to the redirecting of the discussion on Orientalism with a focus on Islamophobia.

²⁶ Nazia Kazi points out that not all Muslims are Arabs, and not all Arabs are Muslims. As she also indicates, terms like “Muslim-majority countries or the MENA region (Middle East/North Africa)” fall short. Kazi, *Islamophobia, Race, and Global Politics*, loc. 1253–1254, Kindle.

²⁷ Aly Kassam-Remtulla, “Sinophobia, the new Islamophobia,” *Al Jazeera*, September 11, 2020, <https://www.aljazeera.com/indepth/opinion/sinophobia-islamophobia-200910090159153.html>.

The Concept of “Religion”

In *Postcolonial Imagination and Feminist Theology*, Kwok begins the introduction by sharing her brief reflection on similarities between her and Edward Said’s experience of living under British colonial rule, though they had grown up on different continents.²⁸ Acknowledging the impact of Said’s *Orientalism* on postcolonial criticism, Kwok emphasizes the importance and relevance of his work for Christian theologians and scholars in Christianity primarily due to the role of the Christian “West” in constructing and promulgating the negative images of the “Orient” as demonstrated in *Orientalism*.²⁹ Kwok goes on saying that while reading Said’s critique of Orientalism, she continued to think of “how the fields of biblical studies, religion, and theology have contributed to the narratives of empire,” and how the great theologians whom she has admired were “influenced or tainted by the colonialist ethos and mentality.”³⁰ She provides some examples of the ways in which biblical studies and religious studies scholars have used postcolonial theory to examine their own disciplines by interrogating the European Orientalist discourse’s influence on biblical studies and the complicity of Western scholars with colonialism in religious studies. As for theologians, Kwok contends that mainly due to the history of theology’s relation with empire building in the modern period, with a few exceptions, they have hardly paid attention to the field of postcolonial theory.³¹ Kwok even admonishes “progressive” theologians, including feminist and racially minoritized ones, for not sufficiently addressing theology’s “collusion with colonialism in their theoretical framework.”³²

While Kwok’s postcolonial criticism is influenced by Said’s work, her approach to the concept of religion and subsequently the separation of the religious and the secular diverges from those of Said. For instance, regarding Said’s position on religion, Nelson Maldonado-Torres contends that in spite of his critical interrogation of the logics of imperialism, Said’s discourse “presupposes a

²⁸ Kwok, *Postcolonial Imagination and Feminist Theology*, 1.

²⁹ Kwok, *Postcolonial Imagination and Feminist Theology*, 3.

³⁰ Kwok, *Postcolonial Imagination and Feminist Theology*, 4.

³¹ Kwok, *Postcolonial Imagination and Feminist Theology*, 6.

³² Kwok, *Postcolonial Imagination and Feminist Theology*, 7.

transhistorical and transcultural view of religion.”³³ Similarly, Yazid Said also says that Said sees religion “as a universalizable definition that applies across history, when it is little more than an expression of the circumstances of seventeenth-century Europe.”³⁴ Maldonado-Torres maintains that Said does not question the logic that identifies “the religious with dogma” and the secular with “the freedom of speech and critical inquiry.” Rather, he makes of religion “the quintessential source of all evils,” detecting “religion wherever there is a menace to free inquiry.”³⁵ Maldonado-Torres continues that Said even compares Orientalism to religious discourse when he states, “each serves as an agent of closure, shutting off human investigation, criticism, and effort in deference to the authority of the more-than-human, the supernatural, the other-worldly.”³⁶ One of the plausible conclusions that can be drawn from Said’s comparison between Orientalism and religious discourse is that so-called secular criticism becomes the only viable means for critical thinking and free speech. To put it differently, when or if “religion is understood to be antithetic [*sic*] to critical thinking and theory,” it makes it not necessary to “seriously engage ideas articulated from religious perspectives,” or even the subaltern who happens to be “religious.”³⁷ Such a view of religion and being religious as disassociated with critical inquiry, Maldonado-Torres contends, helps to maintain epistemic hegemony of the “secular” West, which in turn ironically makes the “secular post-colonial critic” become “an ally of the West.”³⁸ Taking Said’s work seriously would mean then not

³³ Nelson Maldonado-Torres, “Secularism and Religion in the Modern/Colonial World System: From Secular Postcoloniality to Postsecular Transmodernity,” in *Coloniality at Large: Latin America and the Postcolonial Debate*, eds. Mabel Moraña, Enrique Dussel, and Carlos Jauregui (Durham & London: Duke University Press, 2008), 376.

³⁴ Yazid Said, “Edward Said, Religion, and the Study of Islam: An Anglican view,” *Journal for the Academic Study of Religion* 26, no. 2 (2013): 129.

³⁵ Maldonado-Torres, “Secularism and Religion,” 376.

³⁶ Edward Said, *The World, the Text, and the Critic* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1983), 290, quoted in Maldonado-Torres, “Secularism and Religion,” 376.

³⁷ Maldonado-Torres, “Secularism and Religion,” 378.

³⁸ Maldonado-Torres, “Secularism and Religion,” 378. Regarding the term secularism that has been long ignored as an object of Said’s scholarship, Gil Anidjar extends his own argument stating, “Secularism is Orientalism. And Orientalism is

overlooking his view of religion. It could also mean further interrogating the concept of religion in relation to efforts to decolonize religious and theological studies that are inextricably connected to enduring Western colonial legacy.

In contrast, Kwok's postcolonial theology of religious difference provides a critical view of the concept of religion, suggesting that we move beyond a pluralistic theology of religions. Pointing to the reappearance of the problem of Christianity's relationship to other religious traditions in the twenty-first century, Kwok proposes to critically examine the theology of religions that is based on the liberal paradigm of religious pluralism within the political context of US imperialism. Although the different forms of pluralistic theology of religions no longer blatantly posit Christianity as the superior or the true religion as opposed to other "false" religions, she argues that similar obstacles reemerge in contemporary theological discussion of religious pluralism due to "the colonial legacy of liberal theology and the lack of self-consciousness about this legacy among Western theologians," including some White feminist scholars.³⁹ She points out two major assumptions of a pluralistic theology of religions. One is the uncritical use of the category of "religion" and the other is the problematic construction of "world religions."⁴⁰ Citing religious studies scholars such as Wilfred Cantwell Smith and Timothy Fitzgerald, Kwok contends that the use of "religion" as a unique concept applicable cross-culturally and the construction of "religion"/"religions" as objects of study based on the distinction between religion and the secular are part of a broader historical process of Western colonialism, imperialism, and neocolonialism.⁴¹

As Kwok explicates in more detail a postcolonial theology of religious difference, she draws on religious studies scholars' critical

Christianity. It is Christian imperialism." Furthermore, he maintains that secularism participates in a set of devices that make the religion of the others, or their "nationalism, primitivism, militarism, and terrorism," more of a menacing danger. See Gil Anidjar, "Secularism," *Critical Inquiry* 33, no.1 (Autumn 2006): 66, 64.

³⁹ Kwok, *Postcolonial Imagination and Feminist Theology*, 201. For more detailed discussion on the pluralistic theology of religions, see Chapter 7, "Beyond Pluralism."

⁴⁰ Kwok, *Postcolonial Imagination and Feminist Theology*, 202.

⁴¹ Kwok, *Postcolonial Imagination and Feminist Theology*, 202.

interrogation of the concept of “religion,” which has commonly been defined as a private belief system. However, she does not completely abandon the term “religion” itself. Instead, she agrees with Richard King, who proposes using the concept of religion “strategically.” The strategic use of the term religion is necessary, she argues, because of the ways it has been used “in the Western cartographical imagination, such as in the demarcation of the ‘religious’ from the ‘secular’, and in the mapping of diverse cultures, traditions, practices, and communities.”⁴² Finding David Chidester’s definition of religion as “intrareligious and interreligious networks of cultural relations”⁴³ also helpful, Kwok extends her critique of the ways religion has been treated by theologies of religion as a reified system existing in a vacuum detached from other spheres of social life and relations. The issue is “not religious diversity but religious difference as it is constituted and produced in concrete situations, often with significant power differentials,”⁴⁴ as is indicated by Christian theology’s role in constructing the Other through the use of the category of religion that has been shaped by Christian theism. Kwok continues to discuss religious difference and the construction of the Other in relation to the connection between religion and civil society.

“Christian Secularism”

Kwok’s postcolonial theology of religious difference calls attention to the relationship between religion and civil society formed through the separation of the religious from the secular, a hallmark of the modern Western ideology of secularism. As Talal Asad argues, the prevalent notion of religion as a belief system disconnected from social and political life is inseparably connected

⁴² Richard King, “Cartographies of the Imagination,” *Evam: Forum on Indian Representations* 3 (2004): 283–85, quoted in Kwok, *Postcolonial Imagination and Feminist Theology*, 204. King advocates a “dual-strategy—a ‘double-move’ which contests and interrogates but also actively re-reads such taken-for-granted concepts of the western cartographic imagination in new and imaginative ways.” King, “Cartographies of the Imagination,” 257–258.

⁴³ David Chidester, “Anchoring Religion in the World: A Southern African History of Comparative Religion,” *Religion* 26 (1996): 155, cited in Kwok’s *Postcolonial Imagination and Feminist Theology*, 205.

⁴⁴ Kwok, *Postcolonial Imagination and Feminist Theology*, 205.

to the emergence of the notion of the secular in the West.⁴⁵ As many scholars have already traced in detail, the rise of secularism as a dominant ideology of Western modernity cannot be understood separately from the predominance of Christianity in the Western context, more specifically Protestant Christianity. The separation of the religious and the secular that is foundational to secularism was, in fact, “made possible by the Protestant definition of religion as private belief that, unlike embodied ritual or custom, could be sustained without public display or enactment.”⁴⁶ This argument is echoed by Tracy Fessenden, who argues that the prevailing notion of religion as a private belief system does not just stem from the “Christian” way of being religious, but it is specifically “a Protestantized conception of religion” that dictates the “meanings of both the religious *and* the secular” (italics in the original).⁴⁷ In other words, Christian norms and values, specifically Protestant Christian norms and values, continue to dominate the so-called secular West. Such an influence by Protestant Christianity resonates with what Winnifred Sullivan calls “protestant” with “a small ‘p’” that indicates “protestant reflection and culture” in the US public sphere, including the courts.⁴⁸ The “Christianized,” more specifically Protestantized, notion of religion is also racialized, intensifying the “othering” of non-Christian religious people as irrational, uncivil, and carnal. Fessenden contends that “the racializing of religion in the colonial enterprise” accompanied with it the assumption that “the more distant a culture from those Protestant norms, the more damaging to women and the more in need of colonial or missionary reform.”⁴⁹ The split between “good” and “bad” religion can be traced back to

⁴⁵ See Talal Asad, *Formations of the Secular: Christianity, Islam, Modernity* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2003).

⁴⁶ Melissa E. Sanchez, *Queer Faith: Reading Promiscuity and Race in the Secular Love Tradition* (NYU Press, 2019), loc. 353–356, Kindle.

⁴⁷ Tracy Fessenden, “Introduction,” in *Culture and Redemption: Religion, the Secular, and American Literature* (Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2007), 4.

⁴⁸ Winnifred Fallers Sullivan, *Impossibility of Religious Freedom* (Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2005), 7.

⁴⁹ Tracy Fessenden, “Afterword: Critical Intersections: Race, Secularism, Gender,” in *Race and Secularism in America* (Religion, Culture, and Public Life), eds., Jonathon S. Kahn and Vincent W. Lloyd (New York, Columbia University Press, 2016), loc. 265, Kindle.

“feminization and racialization” of religion in this way.⁵⁰ “Good” religion is one that is “closer” to Western civilization and therefore “less” damaging to women. This view also resonates with Maldonado-Torres, who similarly argues that while colonization was justified in secular discourse that regarded the colonial others as “primitives” who live “in stages where only religion or tradition dominated their customs and ways of being,” not all religions were viewed necessarily as equally problematic.⁵¹ Other religion’s value was based on its proximity to Christianity and, more specifically, Protestant Christianity.

By not taking both religion and the secular as a neutral or a natural category grounded in the presumed separation of religion and the secular, Kwok’s postcolonial theology of religious difference allows one to critically engage in conversations regarding Christian secularism and its accompanying binaries (e.g., public/private, civilization/barbarism, progress/backward, democracy/tyranny, good religion/bad religion), which is pertinent to the issue of Islamophobia. For instance, Kwok argues that a sharp contrast is set between modern Western countries and so-called underdeveloped countries in ways that the latter are ostensibly governed by “religion” conceived as a regressive force incompatible with democracy and civility.⁵² Such contrast has helped to justify the War on Terror under the banner of democracy, progress, civilization, and women’s rights, reinforcing the view of Arab and/or Muslim-majority countries as “intolerant,” “barbaric,” “irrational,” “dogmatic,” and “patriarchal.” A related illustration provided by Kwok is the post 9/11 renewal of “Orientalist constructions of difference and misrepresentation of the Muslims” pervading the media and popular culture, in which Arab and/or Muslim-majority countries are depicted as “theocratic” and “backward,” with women wearing the burka.⁵³ She argues that “religious difference” was utilized by the Bush administration and the Christian right in order to promote their War on Terror and to incite patriotism among the American people. Concerning such use of Christian rhetoric by Bush to warrant the US’ global dominance, Kwok draws attention to what

⁵⁰ Fessenden, “Afterword: Critical Intersections,” 265.

⁵¹ Maldonado-Torres, “Secularism and Religion,” 366.

⁵² Kwok, *Postcolonial Imagination and Feminist Theology*, 205–6.

⁵³ Kwok, *Postcolonial Imagination and Feminist Theology*, 206.

Rosemary Radford Ruether calls American messianic nationalism. Ruether defines this nationalism as “an ideology rooted in the belief that the United States of America is uniquely an elect nation chosen by God to impose its way of life on the rest of the world by coercive economic means, and even by military force, if it deems necessary.”⁵⁴ This may sound as if American messianic nationalism is unrelated to “secularism,” but this “American messianic nationalism” is enacted in US “Christian secularism.” Or, to put it bluntly, US Christian secularism is American messianic nationalism in disguise. Furthermore, just as gender is at the center of the discourse on (Christian) secularism, Christian secularism is racialized secularism linked to whiteness. Race is an integral part of the discussion of (Christian) secularism. This is well pointed out by Vincent Lloyd, who asks “whether it is ever possible to talk about secularism without talking about whiteness.”⁵⁵

Noting the predominance of the Christian version of secularism in the US, Janet Jakobsen and Ann Pellegrini argue that Christian secularism is traced in the ways US law and policy are based on Christian norms and values, especially regarding gender and sexuality, as well as in the ways US secular culture is “presumptively Christian.”⁵⁶ They contend that a dominant narrative that says secularism with European and Christian origins is “universal and fully separate from Christianity” is a doubtful claim because it still remains tied to Protestant Christianity.⁵⁷ In their examination of the commentaries on the former President Barack Obama’s Nobel Peace speech, Jakobsen and Pellegrini look into commentator Andrew Sullivan’s essay in which he claims that Christian secularism is “open and tolerant in ways that ‘Islamic

⁵⁴ Rosemary Radford Ruether, “Christians Must Challenge American Messianic Nationalism: A Call to the Churches,” *Pacific School of Religion*, <http://www.psr.edu/page.cfm/1=62&id=1802>, cited in Kwok, *Postcolonial Imagination and Feminist Theology*, 206

⁵⁵ Vincent W. Lloyd, “Introduction: Managing Race, Managing Religion,” in *Race and Secularism in America*, eds., Jonathon S. Kahn and Vincent W. Lloyd (New York, Columbia University Press, 2016), loc. 7, Kindle.

⁵⁶ Janet R. Jakobsen and Ann Pellegrini, “Bodies-Politics: Christian Secularism and the Gendering of U.S. Policy,” in *Religion, the Secular, and The Politics of Sexual Difference*, eds. Linell E. Cady and Tracy Fessenden (New York: Columbia University Press, 2013), 140.

⁵⁷ Janet R. Jakobsen and Ann Pellegrini, “Introduction,” in *Secularisms* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2008), 3.

civilization 'is not."⁵⁸ The rhetorical effect of such a claim is that "the violence of terrorism justified in the name of Islam takes on a particular meaning and particular terror" because such violence represents a threat to "the openness, tolerance, and freedom of Christian secular society."⁵⁹ As Jakobsen and Pellegrini point out, the problem with this kind of claim is that the violence inflicted by the US through the War on Terror is viewed not only as "necessary" but also "less violent" and "necessarily more peaceful" than violence targeting the US. The danger of this view is that US state-sanctioned violence is "about tolerance and peace rather than about war."⁶⁰ While noting the undeniable differences between the Bush administration and the Obama administration, Jakobsen and Pellegrini claim that one consistent thread between the two administrations is "the dependence on Christian secularism as one link in the chain of enactments that allow the US to claim to be the defender of freedom, justice, and even peace, while pursuing militarism across the globe and across the decades."⁶¹ Similarly, while acknowledging a stark difference between George W. Bush, who used the phrase of waging "Crusades" against terrorism, and Barack Obama, whose Cairo speech included the debunking of anti-Muslim stereotypes, Nazia Kazi also poses a rhetorical question, "Yet just how different were the two figures with regard to the Muslim world?"⁶²

Jakobsen and Pellegrini further demonstrate how gender and sexual normativity serve as markers of a "domestic" morality, the maintenance of which will continue to portray the US as a "moral" nation that, despite the violence of the US War on Terror directed

⁵⁸ Jakobsen and Pellegrini, "Bodies-Politics," 152. Jakobsen and Pellegrini expound on Obama's adoption of two central aspects of Reinhold Niebuhr's "Christian realism" in his Nobel speech: "one, that there is evil in the world and two, that "the existence of this evil requires the United States to take up its war-making capabilities -and to do so in the name not just of justice but of peace," 150.

⁵⁹ Jakobsen and Pellegrini, "Bodies-Politics," 152.

⁶⁰ Jakobsen and Pellegrini, "Bodies-Politics," 153. Maryam Khalid also talks about how the US-led military interventions in Afghanistan and Iraq can be "presented as *necessary* (emphasis original) in order to bring civilization, democracy, and equality to the oppressed and to discipline the barbaric enemy." Maryam Khalid, "Gender, orientalism and representations of the 'Other 'in the War on Terror," 20, 15-29.

⁶¹ Jakobsen and Pellegrini, "Bodies-Politics," 153.

⁶² Kazi, *Islamophobia, Race, and Global Politics*, loc. 1668, Kindle.

against Muslim-majority countries, offers “the Muslim world” freedom and democracy.⁶³ Such positioning of the US as a morally superior country governed by “secular” law in which Christian sexual norms are embedded is racist because “the Muslim world” and its subjects are marked as the “immoral” other who continue to lag behind regarding gender and sexual equality and freedom due to their adherence to Islam. The racialization of Islam has additionally intensified the othering of Muslims and those perceived as Muslim. “Islam” is conceived as a religion that is incompatible not only with (Western) civilization and modernity, but also with “whiteness.” Such racialization of Islam is unmistakably seen in discourses on the War and Terror that reinscribe “the dichotomy between the benevolent, civilized and moral masculinity of the West and the backward, barbaric, oppressive, deviant masculinity of the ‘brown man.’”⁶⁴ In such a dichotomy, Muslim men are rendered as violent threats to democracy who need to be surveilled, profiled, imprisoned, or deported, and Muslim women are portrayed as victims of their “brown men.” This anti-Muslim racism is based on the “racialization of sexism” that operates through “the portrayal of sexism and patriarchy as the exclusive domains of the (non-western and Muslim) Other.”⁶⁵ Christian secularism and its presumed “universal” values, such as freedom, human rights, and liberal democracy, are set in a sharp contrast to the Muslim-majority and/or Arab world that is ostensibly steeped in “religion” and therefore lacking those values. The most recent manifestation of this racialization is readily found in the Muslim Ban under the Trump administration.⁶⁶

In a similar vein, Joan Scott argues that when secularism is “associated with reason, freedom, and women’s rights” and Islam with “a culture of oppression and terror,” culture becomes “reason’s

⁶³ Jakobsen and Pellegrini, “Bodies-Politics,” 164.

⁶⁴ Khalid, “Gender, orientalism and representations of the ‘Other ’in the War on Terror,” 20.

⁶⁵ Sara R. Farris, *In the Name of Women’s Rights: The Rise of Femonationalism* (Durham: Duke University Press), loc. 74, Kindle. I also talk about the “racialization of sexism” in “The Muslim Ban and the (Un)Safe America,” in *Feminist Praxis against U.S. Militarism*, eds., Nami Kim and Wonhee Anne Joh (Lexington Books, 2019).

⁶⁶ See Nami Kim, “The Muslim Ban and the (Un)Safe America.”

other,” which means that whereas reason is associated with the progress of history, culture is seen as safeguarding unchangeable tradition.⁶⁷ In this binary, secularism is represented as the guarantor of gender equality, whereas Islam is viewed as opposite of it.⁶⁸ Referring to the connection between secularism discourse’s insistence on gender equality and its anti-Islamic stance that is rooted in colonial history, Scott maintains that conversion to Christianity was offered as “a way of civilizing so-called backward peoples” and religions were ranked by their treatment of women and the place of women in their systems.⁶⁹ Christianity was bestowed the position of superiority among religions for its “fair” treatment of women, and “Christian secularism” continues to occupy that position.

Kwok’s Postcolonial Theology of Religious Difference

The opening question of Kwok’s postcolonial theology of religious difference contests a binary comparison that puts Christianity in the superior position, and instead asks, “How do we deal with the fact that Western Christian theological discourse about religious difference is constructed in such a way as to justify a hierarchical ordering of religious traditions, which always puts Christianity on the top?”⁷⁰ Accordingly, a postcolonial theology of religious difference from a feminist perspective would not simply compare and contrast different religious traditions in order to find “which religion is most patriarchal” and thus inferior, but instead would focus on “how patriarchal relations in the religious arena intersect with and are transformed by colonial and other unequal relations.”⁷¹ Noting religion as the “original globalizer,” Kwok’s postcolonial feminist theology of religious difference urges theologians and religious studies scholars to interrogate “the ways religion intersects with gender, race, and transnationalism in the age of globalization.”⁷² Such interrogation is important because it does

⁶⁷ Joan Scott, *Sex and Secularism (The Public Square)* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2017), loc. 3, Kindle.

⁶⁸ Scott, *Sex and Secularism*, 7.

⁶⁹ Scott, *Sex and Secularism*, 22.

⁷⁰ Kwok, *Postcolonial Imagination and Feminist Theology*, 205.

⁷¹ Kwok, *Postcolonial Imagination and Feminist Theology*, 207.

⁷² Kwok, *Postcolonial Imagination and Feminist Theology*, 207.

not rank religions based on a superficial understanding of the “position” or “status” of women, which often ends up placing Christianity as “advanced” or “superior” to other religious traditions. It is also helpful because it does not lead to an ahistorical perspective on religion and particularly to a problematic condemnation of Islam as the most violent and patriarchal religion, as is often found in both contemporary popular and political discourses. Furthermore, by showing how women of different religious traditions confront, resist, and fight the forces of both secular nation-state and religious authorities, it challenges androcentric interreligious dialogue that is often based on the liberal paradigm of religious pluralism as well as the impasse posed by the binary of the atheist secular left and the religious right (or fundamentalism). Instead of presuming the operation of “religious pluralism” when Protestant Christian values and norms shape the “secular” US and the West, Kwok takes seriously the power differentials between Christianity and other religions as well as within Christianity, and probes how they have been produced historically and continue to be (re)produced in the contemporary geopolitical context.

As mentioned earlier, Kwok’s articulation of a postcolonial theology of religious difference elicits discussions on the interrelated topics of Orientalism, the concept of religion, and Christian secularism that conjecture that Islam is incompatible with many characteristics of modern Western society. What this suggests for Asian/American theology in relation to Islamophobia is not that those of us who engage Christianity as a primary area of scholarly interest and focus should become an expert on Islam. However, as the religious studies scholar Megan Goodwin stresses, the work of disrupting American anti-Muslim hostility should not fall solely to Islamic Studies scholars.⁷³ In other words, Islamic scholars and/or Muslim scholars should not bear the burden of confronting anti-Muslim hostility. As Stephen Sheehi puts it, Islamophobia does not “arise from a generic misunderstanding of who Muslims are and what Islam is.”⁷⁴ Islamophobic attitudes, as the feminist scholar

⁷³ Megan Goodwin, “Unmasking Islamophobia: Anti-Muslim Hostility and/as White Supremacy,” *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 88, no. 2 (June 2020): 354–386, 378.

⁷⁴ Stephen Sheehi, *Islamophobia: The Ideological Campaign against Muslims* (Atlanta:

Jasmin Zine argues, are “part of a rational system of power and domination that manifests as individual, ideological, and systemic forms of discrimination and oppression.”⁷⁵ Because Islamophobia operates on multiple dimensions—individual, ideological, and systemic—a “true” or “better” understanding of Muslims and Islam will not necessarily eradicate it. The task of theologians, including Asian/American theologians, is not about providing “corrective” content on Islam, which does not “meaningfully disrupt anti-Muslim hostility,” as Goodwin puts it.⁷⁶ It is rather about critiquing the ways in which Christian supremacy is concealed or assumed in the context of the pervasive Christian secularism that has reinforced anti-Muslim racism and vilification of Islam. Islamophobia is also spreading beyond the Western hemisphere in cultural and political discourses, practices, and popular imaginations. It is the responsibility of Christian theologians to challenge Islamophobia, understanding it as “a cornerstone of an overarching system of white supremacy”⁷⁷ that is inextricably connected to Orientalism, Christian Zionism, Christian supremacy, and Christian secularism, historically as well as in the present time. Asian/American theology also needs to critically explore the ways “Christian secularism” affects, as well as is challenged by, the Asian/American community that is religiously, culturally, ethnically, and economically heterogeneous. It is also necessary for Asian/American theology to engage in a critical examination of the ways in which Asian/American communities have been complicit with Islamophobia that has been perpetrated on multiple dimensions, wittingly or inadvertently.

In *Postcolonial Imagination and Feminist Theology*, Kwok writes that she hopes to “create a little more space to imagine that an

Clarity Press, 2011), 32.

⁷⁵ See Jasmin Zine, “Anti-Islamophobia Education as Transformative Pedagogy: Reflections from the Educational Front Lines,” *The American Journal of Islamic Social Sciences* 21, no. 3 (2004): 114. Todd Green defines Islamophobia “as a form of cultural racism that instigates animosity based on religious beliefs, cultural traditions, and ethnicity.” See Todd Green, “Islamophobia,” *Oxford Research Encyclopedias of Religion*, April, 2019), <http://oxfordre.com/religion/view/10.1093/acrefore/9780199340378.001.0001/acrefore-9780199340378-e-685?fbclid=IwAR2nTk-mwLNH8XpyNv7eOuOj7jZ-k7YTIH9MdQ-8ndBXPo68ZcGxvwFZVA4>.

⁷⁶ Goodwin, “Unmasking Islamophobia,” 378.

⁷⁷ Kazi, *Islamophobia, Race, and Global Politics*, loc. 217–18, Kindle.

alternative world and a different system of knowledge are possible.”⁷⁸ This essay is a small endeavor to join her efforts in creating such space. Thus, the attempt to reorient Orientalism as a way to integrate issues related to Islamophobia is not just for the sake of addressing a lacuna in Asian/American theological discourse. It is part of imagining a different world where racialized sexist and sexualized racist onslaught directed at the “others” will be no more.

⁷⁸ Kwok, *Postcolonial Imagination and Feminist Theology*, 3.

A Letter

Jung Ha Kim

Dear Pui-lan,

I had a quite different plan when Tat-siong Benny Liew and Rita Nakashima Brock extended an invitation to contribute to this Festschrift. I was going to write mostly about how I see and understand your contributions in the academy, profession, and PANAAWTM (Pacific, Asian, and North American Asian Women in Theology and Ministry). Everyone who knows (of) you, no doubt, would have much to admire and celebrate in your trailblazing work and I had planned to add my applause.

Then the COVID-19 global pandemic spread and raged. The world as I knew it and took for granted crumbled. People at my workplace had to (re)tool for remote education, several colleagues of mine opted for (early) retirement, and some vowed never to return to the pre-COVID normalcy and followed their passion and launched new businesses. Some students in my classes have been infected and I know a student who “attended” eight funeral/memorial services in summer 2020 alone. While the pandemic alone did not cause social stratification, it manifested deep-seated inequalities of all types in undeniable manners. Outcries for justice, especially racial reckoning, spread everywhere in the US and the world. And much of the hard-earned gender equality in the labor market has been fast eroding as families struggle to juggle employment and home-schooling their children for the long haul. Amidst all this, I decided I would live or die together with my mother in her late eighties, and brought her from Los Angeles, California, her home for the last four decades, to Atlanta, Georgia. Everything feels rather personal and consequential to me these days, and with this sense of rawness and urgency, I decided to write a letter to you as we sojourn alongside this rough and strange terrain of life.

I want to discuss only the things that feel personally relevant presently since there are too many distracting fake-urgencies that demand our attention these days. I think this pandemic push to the online world 24/7 weakened my ability to carve out enough time to work on things that matter the most. My attention has been scattered and focused mostly on corresponding with others as if cyberspace is the only possible means by which I can (re)connect with people. While I haven't had much time or space to write lately, I also noticed that I never stopped writing in my head. You see, I have developed a habit of taking (field)notes when I experience unfamiliarity. Writing, or more specifically, recording, is a habit that I've acquired as an educator that may survive through these abrupt and profound changes, once again. So this letter to you will be fragmented, raw, and intended to return to at a later time, like other recordings of fieldnotes I keep. In a way, then, I am also making a public statement that you are a friend (and not only a colleague) since I rarely share fieldnotes unless I get to work on them as somewhat cohesive and selective observations for public consumption. So, here I go.

I don't remember the very first time we met. Do you? I know that it was before Sa-I-Ku (4-2-9, or April 29, 1992) and sometime in the 1980s. It was probably at one of the (regional) meetings of PANAAWTM, or it could have been at an annual conference of the American Academy of Religion (AAR). One of my many shortcomings is an inability to recall my first encounters with people, be they friends or acquaintances. And I often wonder why we as a culture tend to emphasize only the very first experiences in life when there exist many firsts in most human relationships. Not to make an excuse for my shortcomings, I think the historical context of our first meeting(s) may be worth remembering. As there were such clear demarcations between Asians and Asian Americans at the time, especially in the academy, and they didn't help to build our relationship. Anxious to not fall into the trap of being lumped together as "all Asians are alike" foreigners from without, and insecure to find out too much/little commonalities we may share from within, I focused on building solidarities with only the obvious potential partners—whom I deemed as politically correct Asian Americans.

I am not sure if anyone eavesdropping on this letter would understand the powerful cultural and historical forces that existed at that time to divide the community in the name of diversity. For

example, the ethnic category of “Korean” did not appear in the US Census until 1970 (it was introduced in 1920 but dropped in 1950 as a category), and “Hindu” was considered racially white until 1950 and changed to “Asian Indian” in 1980. The term “Chinese” back then was often referred to as a racial category of all-Asian descent, rather than as an ethnic identity. Not that people in grassroots communities congregated based on the categories of the US Census, ever, but it was a messy and conflicting time to figure out one’s racial and ethnic standing.

What was your experience of that time, Pui-lan? Coming from the colonized territory of Hong Kong as a student, did you find all these political attempts to catalog human differences in the US rather crazy-making? Were you aware that I was too busy discerning whether you’re a “Chinese” or “Chinese American” that I could not interact with you fully and freely as an individual? Did/does our ethnic difference matter much to you? After a lifetime of wrestling with race-ethnicity as a social construct and concrete experiences, I am not sure if I can fully explain how I’ve become more “Asian” than ever before. As if the older I get, the more “Asian” I become! Do you think younger (API) generations would freak out if I say they, too, may feel more “Asian” as time goes by?

Speaking of race, I’d like to share a lesson I learned from refugee youth and how I came to believe in people’s ability to construct a reality that’s meaningful and functional for them. As you know, I used to work at a community center that serves predominantly Asian immigrants and refugees. When I was there, I participated in the summer refugee youth program for 13 consecutive years. The demographics of youth participants changed several times during my tenure, all depending on what the US was involved in internationally. The program was created to serve mostly Vietnamese and Hmong youth in the Atlanta area. Participation of youth from Somalia became noticeable in the third and fourth years, then gradually, Middle Eastern youth replaced Southeast Asian youth in the program. The same program currently serves Bhutanese, Burmese, Iraqi, and Syrian youth. Obviously, the ubiquitous question of “why did they come here?” is useless to these youth. For one, they did not necessarily make the decision to migrate themselves, and secondly, their presence can testify, “they are here because we were there.”

Curious about why and how differently racialized youth would come together to participate in the intense summer program at an Asian American community center, I asked participants, "Why did you choose this community center?" since I knew there were other organizations with larger facilities that were better suited for youth activities. A Somali youth immediately responded without any hesitation, "You serve rice here. We all eat rice." And the look on his face is what made this learning experience unforgettable for me—as if to say, "isn't it obvious to you? How is it that you didn't know?" And another Somali youth who was playing with an Iraqi friend at that time offered, "We are Muslims and we don't eat pork. You asked us what we like to eat and you serve no pork." The trained sociologist in me was speechless. What may be functional and meaningful groupings of people for these youth are based on their embodied knowledge, such as dietary and religious practices of every day. And my understanding of "race" changed permanently on that day.

Don't get me wrong. I've seen enough to know that the imposed "race" categories and daily racialization processes in the US were yet to seep into these youth's everyday life at that time. And I also witnessed enough to know that in due time, these youth would learn to segregate themselves by race, ethnicity, and religion in schools and social life. I could not help but wonder, however, what might happen if we lifted these youth's experiential knowledge as an alternative to ideas of diversity and complexity in a nation that is rapidly changing demographically and geopolitically. If we uplift refugee youth's embodied knowledge, would we be able to challenge and resist the conventional notion of "race" as the single most salient way of cataloging human differences? What would happen if enough of these youth, whose daily lives are intimately intertwined with many cultural people, were to organize and work together for the commonly shared cause(s)? What changes would they be able to bring about? Since I, too, believe that "there is no global social justice without global cognitive justice,"¹ what are my and our responsibilities and opportunities for re-centering people's experience to produce knowledge that is life-enhancing? In "Letter to a Young Poet," Rainer Maria Rilke invites us to live the questions:

¹ Boaventura De Sousa Santos, "The World Social Forum and the Global Left," *Politics & Society* 36, no. 2 (June 2008): 258.

“Live the questions now. Perhaps you will gradually, without noticing it, live along some distant day into the answer.”² In such a time as this, I wonder if living the questions would suffice. What do you think, Pui-lan?

Although I don’t remember our very first meeting, I have many endearing and vivid recollections of you over the years. I remember when you first shared your haiku-style poems at a gathering. You had a broad smile on your face and outstretched arms as you recited the poems and invited us to your world of imagination and creativity. I also remember when you first told me why you asked the faculty if they wanted to come together to sing. And you eventually formed a choir of sorts, at an institution where you’re a visiting faculty at that. You don’t seem to hesitate to initiate things that others might consider additional labor. And this self-induced work and outlets of creativity do not seem to distract you from pursuing your intellectual curiosity and mentorship of students. You take full responsibility for making your life journey more meaningful and enjoyable.

Many would agree when I say that you’re one of those lucky people who love what you do (for a living). Barely a third of workers in the US are fully engaged in their work, according to the recent Gallup Study in 2018. “A Monday through Friday kind of dying,” was what Studs Terkel, oral historian, said about the working experience of people in the US. I am certain that you do not love all that you do equally, but I can feel a sense of gusto, passion, persistence, and focus that you put into all that you do. I do not think, however, many know how you make conscious decisions and efforts to turn your work more enjoyable by laboring on every day. You embody a notion from one of my all-time favorite authors, Flannery O’Connor: “the Habits of Being.” You have become who you are by practicing and striving every day. Malcolm Gladwell also points to the magical number for achieving true expertise: 10,000 hours. That is, it takes devoting three hours a day for ten years to achieve greatness. “Achievement is talent plus preparation.”³ Being a sociologist, Gladwell’s work prioritizes the importance of “preparation” rather than innate talents and the contextual “accumulative advantages” that enable individuals to pursue their

² Rainer Maria Rilke, *Letters to a Young Poet*, trans. M.D. Herter Norton (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1993), 27.

³ Malcolm Gladwell, *Outliers* (New York: Little, Brown & Co., 2008), 38.

daily practices as outliers. Pui-lan, you embody and inspire the concept of an “outlier.”

I also remember the look of disbelief on your face when we got lost at a seminary where we were supposed to hold a meeting. You see, we were at the same seminary before for another occasion. Being a sociologist, I relied on people’s behavioral patterns and took the saying “We are what we eat” seriously and literally, and we went to the wrong place. “We need to follow the smell of the food since we always have food at our meetings,” was what I said to you once we entered the building. And the look you had when we got to the wrong place with (wrong) food! Saying nothing, you took out the campus map from your bag and just charged ahead while I was laughing and trailing behind you all the way across the campus until we finally got to the right place. “Jung Ha followed the smell of the food and got us lost!” was all you said when we arrived at the meeting. And of course, there was food at our meeting and I was still laughing hard at my mistake AND how you charged on—such striking differences between us. Apparently, you have no problem with taking on leadership. A true Aries.

According to Nadiya Shah, an astrologer, “Aries is the sign of the entrepreneur, embodying the assured stance needed to trust your own ideas enough to bet they will be profitable... The higher end of this vibration includes a connection and commitment to the endeavors that one is passionate about, and a strong sense of self-trust, that allows that planet to express itself immediately and with force.”⁴ Our birthdays are not even a full two weeks apart, yet you’re a cardinal sign, and I’m a fixed sign. Do you remember when we used to celebrate all April birthdays at the annual PANAAWTM conference? Out of eight faculty advisors we had at that time, seven were born in April! And out of seven, five of them are the oldest daughters in the family! Coincidence or not, I see a strong Aries in you from time to time.

By the way, I’ve always been puzzled about the general disdain for various endeavors to read and interpret signs of the time and the universe. As Max Weber observed, there are (il)legitimate ways of pursuing a deeper understanding of our places in the universe based on traditions, nations, religions, and cultures over

⁴ Nadiya Shah, *Astrology Realized: Your Journey to Understanding Astrology* (Synchronicity Publications, 2013), 97.

time, but I am especially perplexed when Christians debase and dismiss very human desires to measure and understand the meaning of time and space. Haven't they read the Bible? A list of community leaders in the Bible often included wise men [sic], enchanters, magicians, astrologers, counselors, priests, prophets, prophetesses, seers, wizards, dream interpreters, etc. And what about many festivities, such as Purim, Sukkot, and new moon observances, for example? Didn't the "wise men from the East" come to know about the birth of Jesus based on astrology and prophecy? Aren't many holidays of various cultures also based on astrological and cosmological readings and meanings that people attach to them? I wonder what opportunities would open up if we learn to prioritize everyday knowledge based on its usefulness and applicability rather than legitimacy and reputation. What would our own knowledge and reliance on astrology reveal about who we are?

And speaking of what's been "hidden" that can and will be revealed in due time, I often think about ways in which we discriminate and prioritize various people whose work we heavily rely on. For example, the academic practice of recognizing only the sources that we cite explicitly in our work but not acknowledging the other resources that are deeply embedded in our psyche and worldview. What I am referring to here is a list of resources—actually, a life-line—that goes beyond what we mention in the acknowledgment and reference sections in our (published) work. Since I know too well that citations directly impact the survival of authors in the academic context, I've learned to rely conscientiously on and cite the work of scholars of color and women. Yet I confess, some articles and books that I've read (recently) or remembered while working on a writing project remained hidden from the readers as long as I don't mention them explicitly. I'd like to pause and share a brief list of literature that I know I've been influenced by as I write this letter to you. I may not be able to fully document how and why each of them impacted me in this letter writing, but I know they have.

Bell, Brenda, John Gaventa, and John Peters, eds. *We Make the Road by Walking: Conversation on Education and Social Change*, Myles Horton and Paulo Freire. Philadelphia, PA: Temple University Press, 1990.

- Espiritus, Yen Le, *Body Counts: The Vietnam War and Militarized Refuge(es)*. Oakland, CA: University of CA Press, 2014.
- Guinier, Lani, *The Tyranny of the Meritocracy: Democratizing Higher Education in America*. Boston, MA: Beacon Press, 2015.
- Kim, Michael ByungJu, *Offerings: A Novel*. New York: Arcade Publishing, 2020.
- Kolk, Bessel Van Der, *The Body Keeps the Score: Brain, Mind, and Body in the Healing of Trauma*. New York: Penguin Books, 2014.
- Rosling, Hans with Ola Rosling and Anna Roseling Ronnlund, *Factfulness: Ten Reasons We're Wrong About the World – and Why Things Are Better Than You Think*. New York: Flatiron Books, 2018.

“Writing is a family trade like anything else; you are more entitled to the profession if your ancestors have already set up shop,” Cathy Park Hong asserts in *Minor Feelings: An Asian American Reckoning*.⁵ She acknowledges a literary linkage among three Korean American women: Theresa Hak Kyung Cha, “professor Kim” – who introduced Cha’s work in one of her courses, and herself, and reflects, “[n]ot only did they share my history, they provided for me an aesthetic from which I could grow.”⁶

As in writing, sociology is also a family trade and I have identified and adopted several sociological ancestors, including W. E. B. Du Bois, Anna Julia Cooper, and Choong Soon Kim, who documented his field experiences in the American South in the 1970s. On the outset, perhaps none of them readily resembles the family trade that Hong refers to. For example, W. E. B. Du Bois was not an Asian/Korean American, nor a woman. His scholarly endeavors were often blocked by insufficient means to pursue full-time research. And as an African American man of his time, he romanticized the notion of “Afro-orientalism” and celebrated the Japanese victory over Russia in 1895 as one of the first victories of a non-white nation against a European nation. He didn’t take into account atrocities committed by Japanese imperialists in Asian countries at the time. Yet, his long career as a sociologist provided an ever-evolving and maturing model for me to emulate and align with, especially in such a time like this. That is, while academic sociology popularized Du Bois’s early work that was focused on

⁵ Cathy Park Hong, *Minor Feelings: An Asian American Reckoning* (New York: One World, 2020), 170.

⁶ Hong, *Minor Feelings*, 171.

educating whites/society to fight against racism, his later work is what I find myself conjuring up more. In his own words,

For many years it was the theory of most Negro leaders that white American did not know or realize the continuing plight of Negro. . . . Accordingly, for the last two decades, we have striven by books and periodicals, by speech and appeal, by various dramatic methods of agitation, to put the essential facts before the American people. Today there can be no doubt that Americans know the facts; and yet they remain for the most part indifferent and unmoved.⁷

Du Bois witnessed and was convinced that the core cause of racism is not ignorance, but the willful hatred of whites and the fear against all things nonwhite. And he returned to the people, the community of his people, and devoted himself to building coalitions among people of color both domestically and globally. As Ibram X. Kendi observes, “The problem of race has always been at its core the problem of power, not the problem of immorality or ignorance.”⁸ Still, people in the academy tend to assume and justify to a large extent that knowledge is power and that education can bring about systemic changes. Knowledge is power “only if knowledge is put to the struggle for power,” Kendi warns. For “changing minds is not a movement. Critiquing racism is not activism. Changing minds is not activism.”⁹ Agree or not, like it or not, Kendi (and other antiracists) share particular Du Boisian sociology as their family trade. And I find this branch of the Du Bosian family trade worthy of deep self-honesty, respect, and commitment.

Speaking of the family trade and ancestors that we can adopt and from which we can grow in the context of Asian America, I see people’s tendency to gravitate toward a type of activism that’s more in line with Yuri Kochiyama and/or Grace Lee Boggs—truly inspirational women leaders who showed us how to live everyday life by keeping eyes on the prize, regardless and relentlessly. Equally important to recognize, I believe, is our debt to women who embody different types of praxis in the community—like Dora Yum Kim, co-founder of the first Korean Community Center in Los Angeles, CA. When asked by people, “Do you do things because you want to be

⁷ W. E. B. Du Bois, “A Negro Nation Within the Nation,” *Current History* 42 (1935): 266.

⁸ Ibram X. Kendi, *How to Be an Antiracist* (New York: One World, 2019), 208.

⁹ Kendi, *How to Be an Antiracist*, 209.

liked?" or "Do you consider yourself an activist?", she offers a response that's based on common sense and pragmatism: "[these questions] did make me think about motivations, and how that works. And the conclusion that I came to was that you can't do things solely to be liked. It's certainly rewarding to be appreciated for the things you've done, but I don't think that alone can carry you through. You have to do it because you believe in it. I do things because they need to be done."¹⁰ Then she adds, "Whether I can do it, whether I want to do it, or whether I should or shouldn't do it – those questions are irrelevant. If you think too much about doing something, it won't get done. And if you have to think that much about doing something, maybe you shouldn't be doing it. You have to do what needs to be done if you know that it's the right thing."¹¹

I know many women like Dora Yum Kim in the community who do the right things every day simply because they need to be done. Their life narratives often lack explicit expressions of self-agency or languages of feminist consciousness. I'm not sure if I'd use the terms like "community organizing" or "activism," since what they embody is something beyond the dichotomous acts of revolution or reformation and activism or service. Nor do I think it's another case in point of the archetypical split between Martha and Mary as women leaders in the Christian Bible. While I am well aware of what I am about to say may be neither popular nor respected in certain circles, I think the work of enabling and sustaining the community to thrive by "Doing what has to be done" can be more impactful in the long haul than inciting protest at times.

Not that we need to choose only one family trade, but I noticed many people in the academy who straddle the dichotomy of scholarship and activism as if they are two ends of the same spectrum. When did we begin to consider institutional education as a form of activism? Why do we seek to equate what goes on in the classroom as a form of activism? Isn't it enough to know that the work in the academy is mostly about mutually and reciprocally engaging with people to produce and uplift life-enhancing knowledge? It is essential that we acknowledge and wrestle with our privileges: "At what cost do I have this life? At what cost have I been

¹⁰ Soo-Young Chin and Dora Yum Kim, *Doing What Had to be Done: The Life Narrative of Dora Yum Kim* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1999), 131.

¹¹ Chin and Kim, *Doing What Had to be Done*, 132.

granted this safety?"¹² However well-intended, I do not think coming to terms with our privileges itself is necessarily an act of activism.

Pui-lan, I think I became more aware in my (late) forties that I looked for and gravitated toward women like Dora Yum Kim in the community. Do you think it's another sign of aging? You know, how older people are said to be more conservative. There are numerous indexes and scales that measure people's tendency to become conservative in their general outlook of life as they age. But then, there is also the phenomenon of "gerontranscendence" that points to how older adults tend to experience increased life-satisfaction and happiness with their no-nonsense approach to life. Lars Tornstam, a Swedish sociologist, describes gerontranscendence as "a shift in meta-perspective, from a materialistic and rational view of the world to a more cosmic and transcendent one, normally accompanied by an increase in life satisfaction."¹³ And of course, this does not mean that politically and culturally conservative people experience higher life-satisfaction. Just that there is much wisdom to be earned and learned in the aging process.

Speaking of aging, where did all the years go? We were once students, dreamers, fighters, and young mothers. In a way, we still are. Yet, some experiences feel several lives ago, as if we live a lot of lives over the course of one lifespan. I don't know about you, but I do not wish to go back to any of my previous lives even if I could. There were so many uncertainties and contradictory expectations on being young women in our culture that self-realization was very difficult to experience at that young age, at least in my case. As when Sue Monk Kidd looked back on her life, "There had been so many things I hadn't allowed myself to see, because if I fully woke to the truth, then what would I do? How would I be able to reconcile myself to it? The truth may set you free, but first, it will shatter the safe, sweet way you live."¹⁴ Aging requires enormous courage. Shattering the life I once lived, the aging process unfolds and pushes me into a new life, time and time again. And at times, I feel all my

¹² Hong, *Minor Feelings*, 200–201.

¹³ Lars Tornstam, "Gerotranscendence: A Theoretical and Empirical Exploration," in *Aging and the Religious Dimension*, eds. L. Eugene Thomas and Susan A. Eisenhandler (Westport: Auburn House, 1994), 205.

¹⁴ Sue Monk Kidd, *The Dance of the Dissident Daughter: A Woman's Journey from Christian Tradition to the Sacred Feminine* (New York: HarperCollins, 2016), 22.

white hairs (not gray in my case) are hard-won testimonies and badges of some lives I've completed. The middle age, the awakening, the wisdom/rage of (post)menopause, the third chapter . . . whatever the expressions people use to name this life stage we are in, I think it's been a remarkable journey. And I consider it a privilege to share this journey alongside you, especially for a slow learner like myself.

You may find me vain (and I'm sure it won't be the first time), but how do you manage the cultural pressure to defy aging that's based on a false promise of erasing the trace of time? I mean the allure of one's appearance to look younger, the multi-billion dollar industry of anti-aging skin-care products, supplemental vitamins to increase stamina, etc.

I came across a funny yet self-consciously painful passage in *Nobody's Looking at You* by Janet Malcolm: "There is a wish shared by women who consider themselves serious that the clothes they wear look as if they were heedlessly flung on rather than anxiously selected."¹⁵ Using adjectives like "simple," "tasteful," and "interestingly plain," Malcolm describes how the clothes of Eileen Fisher, for example, mostly in white, gray, and black colors, have been (dis)erving women of a certain age and class: "professors, editors, psychotherapists, lawyers, administrators – for whom the hiding of vanity is an inner necessity."¹⁶ Do you own any "Eileen Fisher" pieces? I do not remember seeing you wearing it. I own a few and know many mutual friends of ours who own Eileen Fisher's clothes. And we tend to share nonchalantly that they are comfortable and lasting. As you may know, Eileen Fisher's clothes are not cheap. So my question is, why on earth did I want to invest money and effort to wear clothes that are merely comfortable? Why do I wish to hide rather than reveal my individuality, and portray myself as a "serious" person who can effortlessly put together an "interestingly plain" look? Who's looking? Whose approval or gaze am I conscious about?

Perhaps, nobody is really looking at me, except myself. And just as a feminist is not necessarily who the woman is but what she does in life to make her life feminist, an (older) adult is not a status of being but constantly evolving to become. Ashton Applewhite, an

¹⁵ Janet Malcolm, *Nobody's Looking at You* (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 2019), 3.

¹⁶ Janet Malcolm, *Nobody's Looking at You*, 9.

expert on ageism, argues for “agefulness” rather than agelessness. According to her, agefulness is “an accretion of all the things we’ve done and been, not cataloged or curated but stored random access within our bones and brains, that makes us who we are.”¹⁷

Like Applewhite’s notion of “agefulness,” a Festschrift normally entails looking back and celebrating accomplishments that one has achieved as an accretion of all the things one has done and been. I’d like this Festschrift to be not only a recollection of all that you accomplished, but also a charge and an inauguration of sorts to launching yet another new life for you. A life full of pursuing your never-ending intellectual curiosity with Pui-lan-esque spunk. And I can’t wait to hear what stories you will continue to share. As Joan Didion puts it, “we tell ourselves stories in order to live.”¹⁸ The kind of stories we tell ourselves matter and the language we use to convey our lived experience also matter. When we simply and simultaneously belong to several communities of accountability and affiliation at once, our stories also need to move beyond the dichotomy of being part of this or that. That is, we are both learners and teachers, young and old, daughter and mother, and Asian and American. What I am thinking of is what Erika Lee said about “global Americans” here as you launch a new life stage: “[Asian Americans] are transnational not because they don’t want to or cannot become fully American. They are transnational because it allows them to achieve something that is quintessentially American: to improve their lives and socioeconomic status for themselves and their families whether that may be solely within the United States, or often, in the United States and somewhere else at the same time.”¹⁹

Coming to another full circle, do you remember a lifetime ago when you edited a special issue of *Spiritus: A Journal of Christian Spirituality*, and extended an invitation for me to contribute? I wanted to rely on my love for reading fiction and considering fiction as a different data set of sorts to record stories of “ghosts” in Asian America. And you took a risk and granted me the liberty and space to experiment with blurring the dichotomy between facts and story-

¹⁷ Ashton Applewhite, *This Chair Rocks: A Manifesto Against Ageism* (Networked Books, 2016), 49.

¹⁸ Joan Didion, “The White Album,” in *We Tell Ourselves Stories In Order to Live: Collected Nonfiction*, ed. John Leonard (New York: Everyman’s Press, 2006), 185.

¹⁹ Erika Lee, *The Making of Asian America: A History* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2015), 11.

telling in novels. Some fifteen years later, I am still grateful for the chance you took with me and would like you to know that I have not ceased to regard Asian American literature as both data and theories that emerge out of people's lived experiences in the community. And how can I, when there are so many voices and beautiful crafts that weave together individual and communal life journeys in them?! And as long as one of the roles of sociologists is to make observations and bear witness to people's lived realities, I am very blessed to be alive amidst generations of powerful storytellers. See, what K-Ming Chang, for example, can summarize in a short paragraph what generations of sociologists have been attesting: "My mother always says that the story you believe depends on the body you're in. What you believe will depend on the color of your hair, your word for god, how many times you've been born, your zip code, whether you have health insurance, what your first language is, and how many snakes you have known personally."²⁰

What stories do you believe in? What stories will you give birth to in your next phase in life? Continue to take charge, Pui-lan. And remember that "long life is a team sport,"²¹ and that I would come along with my cheers and as always, with some food for our journeys.

²⁰ K-Ming Ching, *Bestiary* (New York: One World, 2020), 89.

²¹ Applewhite, *This Chair Rocks*, 166.

Faculty Person of the Year

Helen Jin Kim



February 9, 2019, Dr. Kwok Pui-lan preaching "In Our Own Tongues," Emory University Canon Chapel. Photograph credit: Helen Jin Kim

Dr. Kwok Pui-lan embodies a plethora of identities. She is Theologian, Educator, Public Voice, Prophet, Spiritual Guide, Pioneer, and Organizer. Most strive to do their best in just one of these categories. But Kwok is a singular leader for our times. She is best known for her scholarship that has pioneered a path for theologians and scholars of religion, especially within postcolonial feminist and Asian feminist theologies. Perhaps lesser known is Kwok as "Faculty Person of the Year," to which I gained a front row seat as one of her junior colleagues at Emory.

From 1992 to 2017, Kwok taught at the Episcopal Divinity School (EDS) as William F. Cole Professor of Christian Theology and Spirituality. In Spring 2017, as I completed doctoral studies around the corner at Harvard, we serendipitously learned—amid conversations about her paper “When Asian and Asian American Women Lead”—that we would both teach at Emory’s Candler School of Theology that fall.¹ I accepted a position as Assistant Professor of American Religious History and Kwok as Distinguished Visiting Professor of Theology (2017–2019) and Dean’s Professor of Theology (2020–present).² That summer, we both made the big move from New England to the Deep South.

I witnessed Kwok take Candler by storm. Within the first two years, she twice earned Faculty Person of the Year, an accolade that Candler students bestow upon one faculty member per year with their votes.³ Candler student feedback echoed that of her students at EDS, but it was still a remarkable feat.⁴ If one is curious to see Kwok in action as “Faculty Person of the Year,” one can consult her sermons preached at Emory’s Canon Chapel as well as her leadership as a mentor who embodies what she teaches, as I will do in the following essay.

Kwok as Faculty of the Year: Preacher

Kwok preached two sermons in her first two years at Candler. She unpacked the scriptures using an Asian and Asian American

¹ Kwok Pui-lan, “When Asian and Asian American Women Lead,” *Kwok Pui Lan* (blog), March 27, 2017, <http://kwokpuilan.blogspot.com/2017/03/when-asian-and-asian-american-women-lead.html>. We discussed the opportunities and challenges that Asian and Asian American female faculty face as they make up just six percent of the North American faculty at theological institutions.

² Claire Lennox, “Candler to Welcome Two New Faculty for Spring 2020 Semester,” Emory Candler School of Theology, December 10, 2019, https://news.emory.edu/stories/2019/12/er_candler_faculty/campus.html.

³ Laurel Hanna, “Honors Day Convocation Applauds Candler’s Finest,” Emory Candler School of Theology, April 24, 2018, <https://candler.emory.edu/news/releases/2018/04/honors-day-convocation-applauds-candlers-finest.html>; Laurel Hanna, “Honors Day Convocation Celebrates Outstanding Students, Faculty,” Emory Candler School of Theology, April 11, 2019, <https://candler.emory.edu/news/releases/2019/04/honors-day-convocation-celebrates-outstanding-students-faculty.html>.

⁴ “Teaching Award Presented to EDS Professor Kwok Pui Lan,” *Episcopal News Service*, December 10, 2009, <https://episcopalchurch.org/library/article/teaching-award-presented-eds-professor-kwok-pui-lan>.

hermeneutic. In doing so, she boldly and gracefully challenged her audience to embody equity, diversity, and multiculturalism in a white-dominant campus, church, and culture.

Journey, Luke 10

Approximately three months into her tenure at Candler, Kwok preached a sermon on “journey.” Though Luke 10 was her scripture for preaching, Kwok set Asian and Asian America as the foundational lens for her sermon. In appealing to the metaphor of the “journey” and to Asian American history, Kwok set the tone of her sermon as one identified with a postcolonial history of struggle for equity and liberation. She began: “Asians and Asian Americans have used the metaphor of a journey to describe our experiences of living in North America.”⁵ She then went on to list key historical moments that highlight the entanglement of Asian people with American empire in terms of labor, capital and war: “We recall Japanese workers coming to Hawaii to work on sugar cane plantations. Chinese laborers who worked in the gold mines of California and the transcontinental railroad. Or, those refugees who came to the United States after the Vietnam War.”⁶ These historical moments defy the model minority stereotype of Asians and Asian Americans as upwardly mobile, highlighting their class, gender, and racial struggles. She called her audience to replace their simplistic and popular cultural myths about Asians as “Crazy Rich Asians,” divest from a popular and flat white gaze, and instead, see Asians and Asian Americans as fully embodied and complicated people. She then connected it to the struggles of international students who “have traveled quite a long distance to come to Candler,” inviting her audience to also see their colleagues and students’ struggles as part of this history.⁷

But she did not simply narrate a history of struggle. Kwok preached that the interstitial spaces in which Asian Americans journey can be the very space in which God is encountered. She first named race as a key stratifying structure in the Asian American search for belonging: “Whether we are new immigrants or even

⁵ Kwok Pui-lan, “Service of Word,” sermon, William R. Cannon Chapel at Candler School of Theology, November 2, 2017, Atlanta, GA, <https://vimeo.com/241026263> (00:12).

⁶ Kwok, “Service of Word,” <https://vimeo.com/241026263> (00:26).

⁷ Kwok, “Service of Word,” <https://vimeo.com/241026263> (00:56).

second or third generation, Asian Americans have to search for our identity and sense of belonging. We are often asked, 'Where are you from?' and we are treated as perpetual foreigners in this land. Neither black nor white, we occupy this so-called in-between space in racial discourse, and we are often invisible."⁸ At the same time, she connected this troubled history of racialization as an opportunity for spiritual quest: "The journey, however, can be deeply soul searching and spiritual."⁹ She aligned this quest with the larger Christian tradition in which "[w]e are a pilgrim people," and suggested that Asian and Asian Americans' social location made them proximate to the sojourning Hebrew people: "The Bible speaks to us, Asians and Asian Americans, in a particular way because it depicts the people of God as also a people on the way. . . . Hebrew people . . . their history and memory was integrally linked with war, violence, exile, diaspora, captivity, and return."¹⁰ She further brought dignity to the history of Asian and Asian American hardship as she analogized their "journey" with the conclusion that Jesus taught most powerfully while journeying: "Jesus was a wandering, charismatic leader who travels from place to place with the crowd. Many of the critical moments in Jesus' life and ministry took place not in the synagogue or holy sites, but rather, when he was on the road or in the wilderness Christian faith is a journey, an adventure, an encounter with God who is always doing new things."¹¹ In so doing, she flipped a marginalized Asian American hermeneutic into the central lens through which she invited her audience to engage scripture.

Now, with the Asian American struggle as the primary lens to understand Luke 10—the passage about Jesus sending his disciples two by two to engage in ministry—Kwok offered a few ways in which an Asian American narrative could offer wisdom to doing the teamwork of ministry. First, Kwok suggested that Jesus' leadership model of sending out his disciples two-by-two not only anticipated the potential roadblocks, twists, and turns that they would face, but also helped to recast an individualistic model of ministry. She declared, "We are often taught we should be autonomous and self-reliant. But Jesus tells these people not to go alone but take a

⁸ Kwok, "Service of Word," <https://vimeo.com/241026263> (1:07).

⁹ Kwok, "Service of Word," <https://vimeo.com/241026263> (2:03).

¹⁰ Kwok, "Service of Word," <https://vimeo.com/241026263> (3:05–4:04).

¹¹ Kwok, "Service of Word," <https://vimeo.com/241026263> (4:08).

companion with you. Ministry is teamwork. You cannot just depend on yourself.”¹² An alternative model of collaborative ministry could be found in the way that Asian and Asian American women have led not only in hierarchical ways at the top of a corporate ladder, but also “in the recessed places of the labyrinth or the interstices between the fabrics of a web,” perhaps a model more closely aligned with the interdependent model that Jesus offered his disciples.¹³ Moreover, such a model of collaboration and interdependence, Kwok suggested, could provide the means for bringing about the real and prophetic change that the gospel requires. She declared, “But if we want to be prophetic and true to the gospel, the world may not like us . . . In order to bring real changes, we have to work with people that are different from us, racially, culturally, or religiously. Embracing and embodying diversity in our formative process will prepare us to go out to unfamiliar places and to work with people who may not like us, or who may even be hostile to us.”¹⁴ Thus, Kwok showed that embracing an Asian American hermeneutic, which calls for embracing difference, would better prepare her audience for the challenging work of Christian ministry. The Asian American metaphor of the “journey,” in which they search for a home in an unwelcoming context, could be turned upside down from a seeming disadvantage to an advantage.

In Our Own Tongues, Acts 2

If in her first sermon, Kwok powerfully made the case for the value of embracing an Asian American hermeneutic in a white dominant school, church, and society, in her second sermon, she employed a global Christian and Chinese framework to extend a message of inclusion. On February 5, 2019, Candler rang in the Lunar New Year with Kwok’s sermon “In Our Own Tongues,” which employed the Pentecost passage in the Book of Acts. “I want to focus on only one thing today: speaking in tongues,” she declared. She confessed she had actually never before preached on the topic,

¹² Kwok, “Service of Word,” <https://vimeo.com/241026263> (7:05).

¹³ Kwok, “Service of Word,” <https://vimeo.com/241026263> (8:11). This is in reference to Su Yon Pak and Jung Ha Kim, *Leading Wisdom: Asian and Asian North American Women Leaders* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press), 2017.

¹⁴ Kwok, “Service of Word,” <https://vimeo.com/241026263> (11:02).

at which point the audience laughed at her humble humor (Kwok is funny – her wit is core to her charisma).¹⁵

She began with some observations from church history. The Jesus Movement began as a vernacular movement, and Christianity needs to acquire local tongues to spread. Moreover, as Christianity has migrated from the Atlantic North to the Global South, how do we prepare leaders for a global perspective? She preached against the nativism embedded in western and American Christianity: “God is not a tribal or parochial God, belonging to one people, one nation, one people and one language. God’s kingdom, *basileia*, encompasses the whole inhabited earth, and all peoples and cultures are equally valued in God’s very eyes.”¹⁶ She then dove into her main point, speaking a hard truth to her audience: “To become global citizens and future leaders of faith communities, we have to develop our cultural and religious competencies to serve diverse peoples. When there is only one tongue that dominates our conversation or our theological imagination, we become impoverished and limited.”¹⁷ In critiquing the white dominant language in which theological education often speaks, Kwok honed in on how ill equipped her audience would be if they could only speak in that one key.

Kwok illustrated the importance of speaking in multiple tongues, or multiple languages, by connecting it directly to the Candler context and illustrating her point with a metaphor from Chinese cuisine. She declared,

Some of [the international students] speak English with an accent just like me. Instead of seeing this as a liability, I have always treated this as an advantage. This means we have grown up in another linguistic or cultural world We look at the world and the things we are studying through multiple lenses We may be able to see something new and creative through the cracks, fissures, and even the contradictions of the two worlds.¹⁸

Noting the oft-overlooked advantages of being bicultural and bilingual, Kwok highlighted the value of an international student

¹⁵ Kwok Pui-lan, “Service of Word and Table,” sermon, William R. Cannon Chapel at Candler School of Theology, February 5, 2019, Atlanta, GA, <https://vimeo.com/316160159> (3:57).

¹⁶ Kwok, “Service of Word and Table,” <https://vimeo.com/316160159> (9:10).

¹⁷ Kwok, “Service of Word and Table,” <https://vimeo.com/316160159> (15:08).

¹⁸ Kwok, “Service of Word and Table,” <https://vimeo.com/316160159> (17:10).

body and faculty, and challenged her audience “to live into multiculturalism and not to just pay lip service to it.”¹⁹ She went on to critique the white supremacist and capitalist ideas of multiculturalism that often circulate in higher education. She illustrated an example from Chinese cuisine, appropriate for the Lunar New Year holiday: “Consuming other cultures can be something we do to spice up our lives . . . it will not change who we are or where we are heading . . . In a Chinese dish of chicken and meat, sometimes there are pieces of beautifully craft carrots or broccoli that decorate the dish. This always serves as a reminder for me that we can’t relegate other cultures to the margins as decorations—as if this is what multiculturalism means.”²⁰ She foregrounded her own Chinese culture to critique the white supremacist ideas that still get laced into the project of multiculturalism in American higher education and religious life. Kwok rang her audience into the year of the pig with a courageous word to practice real equity — not the empty multiculturalism where minorities are perpetually ornaments on the edges.

As with her first sermon, Kwok concluded with the challenge to bridge divides and embrace differences, but this time, she challenged her audience to imitate the early Jesus Movement at Pentecost, when they all spoke to each other in different tongues:

‘Can we learn to speak the other tongue?’ I use it both literally and figuratively. It means to enter into another cultural world, long and deep enough to begin to understand it. It means trying to see the world through the other’s perspectives and by doing so, to find new insights for understanding our own culture... Embracing multiculturalism is hard work, but we may be blessed to hear the voice of God speaking in many cultures and tongues.²¹

Primarily using the framework of global Christianity, especially the spread of Christianity in the nonwestern world, and her own Chinese context, Kwok preached a difficult word with grace. Kwok challenges her readers and audiences to live up to their highest ideals.

¹⁹ Kwok, “Service of Word and Table,” <https://vimeo.com/316160159> (18:10).

²⁰ Kwok, “Service of Word and Table,” <https://vimeo.com/316160159> (18:45).

²¹ Kwok, “Service of Word and Table,” <https://vimeo.com/316160159> (21:25).

Kwok as Faculty of the Year: Mentor

To preach a prophetic word to a community is to seek its best. In so doing, as a preacher, Kwok showed us as a community how to live out one of her core teachings: "In my own personal and professional journey, I have not waited for others to create a home for me. Since coming here to Candler, I have jumped right into the community . . . I cannot waste time in wondering whether I belong or whether I could fit in. I just simply invite myself and create a home for myself and others wherever I go."²² Kwok not only preached on how to build equitable spaces as well as on how to make a home even in the most marginalized spaces, but she also mentored the community into these teachings.

When she was voted Faculty Person of the Year, students praised her on several accounts, including her scholarly expertise and culturally competent leadership. At Candler, Kwok taught a range of popular courses in theological studies, including "Christology and Cultural Imagination," "Critical Issues in Global Anglicanism," "God, Creation and the Ecological Crisis," "Eros, Sexuality and the Spirit," and "Asian and Asian American Theology." She also taught a doctoral seminar in the Graduate Department of Religion on Postcolonial Theory and Theology. A student who found Kwok's research focus refreshing stated:

She has an engaging and challenging teaching style on feminist, Asian and post-colonial theology. I had never learned about Asian theology until I came to Emory. Dr. Kwok's unique skill set and background make her an asset for the student and the school. Dr. Kwok has brought a new perspective to theology and teaching. Her passion for theology is sincere and her insights are a gem.²³

She not only taught Asian and postcolonial feminist theologies in the classroom, but also translated it into her strong mentorship and exceptional care for students on the margins, including those of Asian descent. One student remarked: "She is phenomenal. Her teaching is both theoretical and spiritual. She honors students and respects difference, and serves as a mentor for Asian and Asian-American students at Candler."²⁴ Kwok organized several Asian and

²² Kwok, "Service of Word," <https://vimeo.com/241026263> (15:55).

²³ Hanna, "Honors Day Convocation Celebrates."

²⁴ Hanna, "Honors Day Convocation Applauds."

Asian American events: the 100th anniversary of Korea's March First Movement for Independence, which included a multigenerational panel; the 34th PANAAWTM Conference at Columbia Theological Seminary (CTS), which recruited several female students of Asian descent from Candler and Emory to the local organizing committee; and she taught "Asian and Asian American Theology," a first time for Candler.²⁵

In addition to providing invaluable intellectual leadership and fostering an equitable campus culture, students commented on her ministerial leadership more generally. One Candler student said, "When Dr. Kwok arrived on campus for orientation, the building was buzzing about how lucky we were to have a leading scholar in post-colonial and feminist theology visiting us for the year. But not just that—people were also buzzing about how incredibly kind and genuine she was to everyone she met."²⁶ Another student praised Kwok for being "extremely committed to the entire community at Candler. She is present for worship services, lectures, and club events. She also goes out of her way to strengthen the community, organizing a staff/faculty choir and tutoring the Episcopal students for their General Ordination Exams. She routinely connects students doing similar research, and hosts panels, lectures, and conferences to highlight others' work."²⁷ Kwok brought to Candler an open posture to which students gravitated, and it often went beyond the classroom as she ministered to students where they were, often in their deepest needs. In part, she learned of the school's needs through table fellowship, as she recalled: "I have had lunches and dinners with colleagues and students . . . The MTS students told me, 'Have I tried white pizza?' I said, 'No. Can pizza be white?' So I tried that as well" (like I said, Kwok is funny).²⁸ She worked across difference and division, building community, by adeptly using what one EDS student called, her "synergistic energy."²⁹

²⁵ "Journey Toward Justice: PANAAWTM 34th Annual Conference," Columbia Theological Seminary, April 11, 2019, <https://www.ctsnet.edu/events/34th-annual-conference-of-panawtm/>. See also "PANAAWTM 34th Annual Conference Update," Columbia Theological Seminary, April 29, 2019, <https://www.ctsnet.edu/panaawtm-34th-annual-conference-update/>.

²⁶ Hanna, "Honors Day Convocation Applauds."

²⁷ Hanna, "Honors Day Convocation Celebrates."

²⁸ Kwok, "Service of Word," <https://vimeo.com/241026263> (16:42).

²⁹ "Teaching Award Presented."



First Rehearsal for Candler's Choir, January 23, 2019.

Photograph credit: Candler School of Theology.

Indeed, as students had voted for her as faculty person of the year, she left her mark on Emory faculty and staff in more ways than one. By the end of her second year, Kwok had also organized a Candler Choir, composed of faculty and staff, which continues today. The spirit of the choir embodies and exemplifies the vitality Kwok brought to the campus as a whole. As a faculty colleague, Kwok's mentorship was pivotal in my growth as a rookie educator. Before my first semester of teaching, Kwok sent me a copy of *Developing Teaching Materials and Instructional Strategies for Teaching Asian and Asian American/Canadian Women's Theologies in North America*.³⁰ This pedagogical resource, published by Wabash, helped me prepare to teach, especially as I thought about my own presence in the classroom as the first woman of Asian descent and first faculty of Korean descent to be appointed on the tenure track at Candler. I could share in the excitement and weight of that vision with these women who researched and published this guide to teaching. Much to my delight, by the end of my third year at Candler, I had earned

³⁰ Rita Nakashima Brock, Jung Ha Kim, Kwok Pui-lan, Nantawan Boonprasat Lewis, Greer Anne Wenh-In Ng, Seung Ai Yang, and Gale A. Yee, *Developing Teaching Materials and Instructional Strategies for Teaching Asian and Asian American/Canadian Women's Theologies in North America* (Pittsburgh: Association of Theological Schools, 1999), <https://www.wabashcenter.wabash.edu/scholarship/developing-teaching-materials-and-instructional-strategies-for-teaching-asian-and-asian-american-canadian-womens-theologies-in-north-america/>.

two teaching awards from Candler and Emory. In part, I had a strong senior colleague, a woman of color, in Kwok—mentors matter, especially for those on the margins.

Conclusion

Kwok has garnered greater accolades and spoken for larger audiences, but in her everyday moments as “Faculty Person of the Year” at Emory’s Candler School of Theology, her gifts came to life as a woman fully awake. She has integrated multiple identities such that her very presence is a gift, especially as she is rooted in a spirituality that connects contemplation with social action.³¹ I witnessed her embody her vision of an Asian feminist spirituality that celebrates “*ki* (the energy of life), the joy of living and the quest for wholeness,” which I think is ultimately her “secret sauce” as a two-time winner of Faculty Person of the Year.³²

I have written about how Asian American women’s history is American religious history. Scholars like Kwok embody the intellectual history—the history of religious ideas—that women of Asian descent have contributed to the US and beyond.³³ In order to document this history, one needs to build an archive.³⁴ Following the publication of this festschrift, building an archive that includes Asian and Asian American female intellectual and ministerial figures like Kwok would be an important contribution to the academy, church, and society.

³¹ Kwok Pui-lan, *Introducing Asian Feminist Theology* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 2000), 114.

³² Kwok, *Introducing Asian Feminist Theology*, 114.

³³ Kwok Pui-lan, ed., *Asian and Asian American Women in Theology and Religion: Embodying Knowledge* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2020).

³⁴ Though we have Kwok’s published works, we do not yet have a public archive of her sermons or public talks delivered across her career.

Rethinking Surrogacy from an Asian American Christian Ethical Perspective¹

Grace Y. Kao

What does Christian ethics look like from the perspective of the fastest growing racial group in the US—Asian Americans? How do their responses to perennial ethical questions compare with those provided by other racial-ethnic groups? What new methodologies, sources of normativity, or special issues might they offer to the academy, church, Asian American community, and broader society? What, for instance, might an Asian American Christian ethical approach to surrogacy look like as a way of bringing children into the world? Surrogacy, to be sure, is a newer issue in bioethics and unexplored in the first book-length study on the eponymously titled *Asian American Christian Ethics* published in 2015. I offer here a contribution to this burgeoning subfield of study—and do so with the benefit of feedback received on our anthology by colleagues in allied fields, including from this Festschrift's honoree, Kwok Pui-lan.²

Surrogacy remains the most controversial and statistically the least common path to parenthood.³ Its use, however, has rapidly increased by almost 300 percent in the US in the last decade and by

¹ I thank Tat-siong Benny Liew and Rita Nakashima Brock for their invitation to contribute to this Festschrift for Kwok Pui-lan—a senior colleague from whom I have learned so much. I also thank them and Kristine Chong for helpful feedback on an earlier version of this chapter.

² See Grace Y. Kao and Il-sup Ahn, eds., *Asian American Christian Ethics: Voices, Methods, and Issues*, (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2015); and Kwok Pui Lan, Rita Nakashima Brock, Andrew Sung Park, Il-sup Ahn, and Grace Kao, "Roundtable: Asia American Christian Ethics," *Journal of Asian/North American Theological Educators* 2, no. 1 (2016): 106–115.

³ Heather Jacobson, *Labor of Love: Gestational Surrogacy and the Work of Making Babies* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2016), 46.

an estimated 1000 percent worldwide in a shorter timeframe.⁴ Singles and couples are increasingly turning to surrogacy as a way to overcome involuntarily childlessness or secondary infertility. However, as surrogacy's popularity expands, its legal status remains in flux, with many US states and nations across the world enacting more restrictions, if not bans, on the practice while others relaxing their decades-long prohibitions or enacting more regulations to protect the interests of all parties. Supporters of surrogacy see exciting possibilities for the medically or socially infertile to fulfill their yearning for a biogenetically-related child and for women willing to become pregnant for them to exercise their reproductive freedoms accordingly.⁵ Detractors, however, cite a litany of objections.

Surrogacy critics frequently decry the objectification and commodification of women's bodies and reproductive capacities. They view surrogates as exploited or at least at great risk of physical and psychological harm when they perform paid reproductive labor for wealthier would-be parents. They also judge surrogacy to be bad for children overall – be they surrogate-born kids who may end up confused about their parentage, children whose birth mothers are not able or are prevented from caring for them and whose placement

⁴ See Center for Disease Control and Prevention, *2016 Assisted Reproductive Technology: National Summary Report* (October 2018), 53, <https://www.cdc.gov/art/pdf/2016-report/ART-2016-National-Summary-Report.pdf>; and Permanent Bureau of the Hague Conference on Private International Law, "A Preliminary Report on the Issues Arising from International Surrogacy Arrangements," Preliminary Doc. No. 10, March 2012, 6.

⁵ A note about terminology: I describe in this essay all those who can undergo pregnancy as "women," follow convention in referring to such persons as "mothers," and often use "she/her" pronouns throughout when referring to them. Readers should know at the outset a small percentage of those who can become pregnant do not identify as women but as men or transgender men and thus may also use different pronouns and referents ("father"). Should the time come when there are documented cases of transgender surrogates as there are documented cases of transgender men giving birth to their own children, it would be wise to alter our gendered ways of thinking, talking, or writing about surrogates as well. For more about men's pregnancies, see Damien W. Riggs, "Transgender Men's Self-Representations of Bearing Children Post-Transition," in *Who's Your Daddy? And Other Writings on Queer Parenting*, ed. Rachel Epstein (Toronto, Canada: Sumach Press, 2009), 62–71; and K.J. Surkan, "That Fat Man is Giving Birth: Gender Identity, Reproduction and the Pregnant Body," in *Natal Signs: Cultural Representations of Pregnancy, Birth and Parenting*, ed. Nadya Burton (ON, Canada: Demeter Press, 2015).

chances may be diminished when assisted reproductive technology (ART) lures prospective parents away from adoption, or other children who might fear being “given away” in jurisdictions permitting surrogacy. Some objections reflect the idiosyncratic, cherished values of particular groups and stand in tension with one another. For instance, Catholics in conformity with the *Magisterium* fault those who resort to surrogacy for deviating from the good of natural conception between husband and wife and for routinely abandoning or destroying “surplus” embryos through the *in vitro* fertilization (IVF) process required in gestational arrangements. In contrast, radical feminists denounce the surrogacy industry for perpetuating pernicious ideas about women as breeders and for undermining the philosophical foundation of abortion rights insofar as the developing entity might be regarded as “belonging” to the intended parents and thus under their—not the pregnant woman’s—control.⁶

As a question for Asian American Christian ethics, I approach surrogacy in this essay in three ways. The first is descriptive and contextual: I start with Asian American experiences with and investments in this topic. Though Asian Americans are not at the forefront in popular or scholarly discussions on surrogacy, I show how Asians and Asian Americans are nevertheless to be found among the women who bear children for others, the contracting parents who commission them, the children collaboratively born from their arrangements, and other parties (e.g., fertility clinic medical staff, attorneys) tasked to facilitate the process. In moving transnationally, I also show why intercountry surrogacy should pique the interest of Asian Americanists and immigration scholars if it has not already: the practice has become a niche way for foreigners with means, including from Asia, to have children who are US citizens via the Fourteenth Amendment to the US Constitution.

The second way I approach surrogacy is biblically and I do so primarily by drawing upon postcolonial feminist scholarship on Ruth. Ruth has long been of interest to minoritized Bible scholars and theologians in the US and the global South because her story illustrates “the intersections among gender, class, race, ethnicity and

⁶ For examples of each, see John Berkman, “Gestating the Embryos of Others: Surrogacy? Adoption? Rescue?” *The National Catholic Bioethics Quarterly* 3, no. 2 (2003): 309–329; and Gena Corea, *The Mother Machine: Reproductive Technologies from Artificial Insemination to Artificial Wombs* (New York: Harper & Row, 1987).

sexuality in cultural contacts and border crossings.”⁷ Ruth merits a closer look for this project because she can also be read as a surrogate mother, and Naomi and Boaz as intended parents. I turn in this section to reflections on Ruth from three feminist scholars of Asian heritage in the US: Kwok Pui-lan, Gale Yee, and Sharon Jacob.

Finally, when searching for additional moral wisdom to help Asian American Christian ethicists think through the complex questions surrogacy raises, I draw upon the “reproductive justice” (RJ) framework originating from some of the most marginalized voices in contemporary US society. First articulated by 12 Black women activists in the 1990s as a corrective to the dominant progressive “pro-choice” platform, additional BIPOC women have developed RJ further in ways staying true to the framework’s local and international inception. Though the RJ movement has not reached a consensus on surrogacy or other ART, I show how RJ’s central tenets could help shape more ethical surrogacy practices and potentially justify some surrogacy arrangements.

In sum, my Asian American Christian ethical approach to surrogacy prompts me to focus both on special concerns of Asian Americans and on scholarship produced by Asian and other racial-ethnic minoritized women. Asian American Christian ethics as a subfield of study can yield multiple, even mutually incompatible, positions on this method of family expansion depending on what views an individual scholar takes on agency, markets, and assorted family and bioethical matters (e.g., the [im]permissibility of separating sex from reproduction, what connection (if any) exists between marriage and children, the good (or lack thereof) of same-sex parenting, the moral status of embryos). As I have elsewhere defended the conditional moral permissibility—even good—of “altruistic” or “gift” surrogacies,⁸ I focus here on “commercial” or compensated surrogacy. My Asian American Christian ethical approach acknowledges how some arrangements can be

⁷ Kwok Pui-lan, “Finding Ruth a Home: Gender, Sexuality, and the Politics of Otherness,” in *Postcolonial Imagination & Feminist Theology* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2005), 101.

⁸ I have written elsewhere on surrogacy and am completing a book on the topic. See Grace Y. Kao, “Toward a Feminist Christian Vision of Gestational Surrogacy,” *Journal of the Society of Christian Ethics* 39, no. 1 (2019): 161-79; and Grace Y. Kao, “My Body, Their Baby: A Progressive Christian Account of Surrogacy” (unpublished manuscript under contract with Stanford University Press).

exploitative and calls for better safeguards and reform—not abolition—of this method of family expansion so that all parties can discern for themselves whether the potential gains are worth the risks.

Surrogacy in Light of Asian American Realities

Surrogacy is a well-known motif in biblical and theological scholarship. Various women in the Hebrew Bible, including foremothers Sarai, Rachel, and Leah, direct other women to bear children for them. Theologies of substitutionary atonement conceptualize Christ as a “stand in,” a substitute who takes on God’s punishment for sinful humankind. Womanist theologians have shown special concern for Black women who have been forced, from slavery onwards throughout American history, into surrogacy roles to assume the work and responsibilities belonging to others. Pioneering womanist theologian Delores S. Williams combines these three threads in her classic, *Sisters in the Wilderness*. She reads the Bible’s first recorded surrogate, Hagar, as a prototype of Black women’s struggle for survival in a hostile environment, while interrogating the interpretation of Jesus as a vicarious sacrifice for sinful humanity for its failure to hold redemptive value for Black women.

Even more central to our project is Williams’ cautionary note about surrogate motherhood today. She worries the practice might inflame already tense race relations and therein benefit only those with racial and class privilege. In her words,

Will the law legitimate surrogacy to the point that black women’s ovaries are targeted for use by groups more powerful than poor black women? Will surrogacy become such a common practice in wealthy women’s experience that laws are established to regulate it—laws that work to the advantage of the wealthy and the disadvantage of the poor? . . . Will poverty pressure poor black women to rent their bodies out as incubators for wealthier women unable to birth children? . . . Are American women stepping into an age of reproduction control so rigid that women will be set against each other like Hagar and Sarah? Will the operation of certain reproduction technologies, acting in

white women's favor, put even more strain upon the already strained relation between black and white women?⁹

Williams is not alone in presuming that surrogacy as a medical technique would primarily involve white Western commissioning parents being paired with poorer, Black or Brown surrogates. In a 2019 Open Letter to New York Governor Andrew Cuomo, feminist icon Gloria Steinem also warns of "socio-economic and racial inequalities" in surrogacy in her ultimately unsuccessful attempt to block New York from legalizing commercial surrogacy after decades of its criminalization.¹⁰ Thus, key questions for anyone pursuing contextualized scholarship for the Asian American community include the accuracy of this assumed racial demography in this method of collaborative reproduction and what place Asian Americans occupy in it.

Unfortunately, detailed records of the racial or socioeconomic status of the parties involved in surrogacy are impossible to obtain because of the lack of federal or international reporting requirements, selective self-reporting by fertility clinics, and the reality of independent ("indy") arrangements where surrogacy dyads form outside of third-party facilitation. However, in studies on intrastate surrogacy in several Western contexts (the US, UK, Canada, and Australia), white people are overrepresented on *both* sides of the collaborative reproduction—as intended parents (IPs) and as surrogate mothers—while Black folks are largely absent in either role.¹¹ Thus, binary assumptions might not only be warping our understanding of white and Black involvement, but also failing to capture the lived experiences of other racial-ethnic groups. I now make four observations below about Asian and Asian American realities concerning this way of bringing children into the world.

Asians Subsumed under Whiteness

Persons of Asian heritage in Western contexts have taken part in surrogacy arrangements as IPs, including in high-profile, media-sensationalized cases, though they have sometimes been read as

⁹ Delores Williams, *Sisters in the Wilderness: The Challenge of Womanist God-Talk* (New York: Orbis, 2013 [1993]), 73–74.

¹⁰ This letter is reproduced in Vivian Wang, "Surrogate Pregnancy Battle Pits Progressives Against Feminists," *New York Times*, June 12, 2019.

¹¹ See Kao, "Toward a Feminist Christian Vision of Gestational Surrogacy," 178; and Kao, "My Body, Their Baby."

white. Take the precedence-setting *Johnson v. Calvert* (1993), wherein California became not only the first state to declare the compatibility of gestational surrogacy contracts with existing federal and state laws, but also the first to use “intention” as one way of establishing legal motherhood.¹² The mainstream media made much of the gestational surrogate’s (Anna Johnson) blackness, but left unacknowledged the intended mother’s (Crispina Calvert) identity as a Filipina American: “in the eyes of the court and in the public debate surrounding the case, she bec[ame] white.”¹³

We could say something similar about the global media firestorm surrounding “baby Gammy,” who was born on December 2013 to a Thai surrogate (Pattaramon Chanbua) for an Australian couple (the Farnells). Fallout from this case was a key reason why Thailand closed its commercial surrogacy doors to foreign clients in 2015. According to widespread but ultimately inaccurate media reports, the Farnells had “abandoned” Gammy due to his Down syndrome, premature birth, and heart condition, and had only kept his healthy twin sister, Pippah.¹⁴ Despite the intended mother’s Chinese ethnicity (Wendy Li Farnell), the mainstream media widely characterized this disaster as one involving selfish *white* Australians with a checkered history exploiting a poor Asian woman.¹⁵ In short, the intended mother had been granted “honorary white status,” though the Thai surrogate had not. Whether in the precedence-setting California case or this transnational Thai-Australian one, the portrayal of Asian intended mothers who are partnered with white husbands as white themselves is disconcerting for its erasure and merits further exploration.

¹² *Johnson v. Calvert*, 5 Cal. 4th 84, 19 Cal. Rptr. 2d 494, 851 P.2d 776 (1993).

¹³ Deborah R. Grayson, “Mediating Intimacy: Black Surrogate Mothers and the Law,” *Critical Inquiry* 24, no. 2 (1998): 529.

¹⁴ See, for instance, “Baby Gammy: Surrogacy Row Family Cleared of Abandoning Child with Down Syndrome in Thailand,” *ABC News*, April 13, 2016, <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2016-04-14/baby-gammy-twin-must-remain-with-family-wa-court-rules/7326196>.

¹⁵ There was admittedly some interest in Wendy Li Farnell after the media reported David Farnell was convicted of child molestation and the couple had lied about their use of donor eggs. Thereafter, some media acknowledged Wendy’s ethnicity and nationality when reporting the Farnells had met through a Chinese “mail order bride” agency after the failure of David’s first marriage.

Distinctive Concerns among Asian Americans who Turn to Surrogacy and Other ART

Patients of Asian heritage have distinctive medical patterns and needs both as a racial group and as discrete ethnicities. To illustrate, while studies show Asian American/Pacific Islander women in comparison to all other races may have a higher socioeconomic status, a greater likelihood of carrying private insurance, and be more apt to enter pregnancy free of serious comorbidities, they still statistically experience higher rates of maternal morbidity and mortality than their white counterparts do.¹⁶ Other studies reveal that Asian/Pacific Islander women also have the highest rates of ART utilization in comparison to other racial-ethnic groups.¹⁷ But Asian American women tend to wait longer than their other counterparts do to begin IVF after struggling with infertility and this “delay” can impede their success at achieving a clinical pregnancy or live birth since older age is correlated with fertility decline and reproductive loss.¹⁸ One study found the prevalence of endometriosis was significantly higher among the Filipino, Indian, Japanese, and Korean women (15.7%) studied than white women (5.8%), but their lower clinical pregnancy rates was not attributable to it.¹⁹ Another study theorized decreased pregnancy outcomes for Asian versus white IVF patients could be due either to “fundamental biological or genetic differences,” such as Asian women producing more “E₂ for each follicle during ovaria stimulation,” or to “behavioral or environmental factors,” such as their increased exposure to a known reproductive toxin, methyl mercury, which A/PI peoples have been shown to have due to their higher rates of seafood consumption.²⁰ Whatever the case, women of

¹⁶ Maryam Siddiqui et al., “Increased Perinatal Morbidity and Mortality Among Asian American and Pacific Islander Women in the United States,” *Anesthesia-Analgesia* 124, no. 3 (2017): 879–86.

¹⁷ Ada C. Dieke et al., “Disparities in Assisted Reproductive Technology Utilization by Race and Ethnicity, United States, 2014: A Commentary,” *Journal of Women’s Health* 26, no. 6 (2017): 605–7.

¹⁸ Andrew Kan et al., “Do Asian Women Do as well as their Caucasian Counterparts in IVF Treatment: Cohort Study,” *Journal of Obstetrics and Gynaecology Research* 41, no. 6 (2015): 946–51.

¹⁹ Ayae Yamamoto et al., “A Higher Prevalence of Endometriosis Among Asian Women Does Not Contribute to Poorer IVF Outcomes,” *Journal of Assisted Reproduction and Genetics* 34 (2017): 765–74.

²⁰ Karen Purcell, “Asian Ethnicity is Associated with Reduced Pregnancy Outcomes After Assisted Reproductive Technology,” *Fertility and Sterility* 87, no. 2

Asian heritage need to know how their race-ethnicity might affect their fertility to make informed decisions about whether and when to try to become pregnant, begin infertility treatments, retrieve their own eggs or use donor ones, or commission a surrogate. Asian Americans, just like other racial-ethnic groups, would also benefit from more research on racial differences in ART access and outcomes, particularly if the data on Asians and Pacific Islanders could be further disaggregated among our heterogeneous populations since it commonly is not.

Gay Asian men in several Western contexts who turn to surrogacy also have distinctive concerns. Researchers have studied how prospective dads in same-sex partnerships or marriages resolve the oft-sensitive question around which one of them will be the genetic father—an issue that is of special importance to interracial couples. One common strategy is to create as much symmetry as possible during the IVF process by mixing the sperm of each father with an egg from two separate donors of different races to create embryos which, if one or more resulted in a live birth, could phenotypically look “as if” they could be related to both dads. As an Australian Asian-white couple recounts:

Sami: We decided we wanted to have mix race children because I’m Asian and Ian’s Caucasian. So my sperm was mixed with a Western girl and Ian’s with Asian girl and then we selected one [embryo] of each and [went] from there.

Ian: We . . . wanted our children to reflect our backgrounds We wanted them to have not only exposure to and experience with each of our cultures, but we also wanted them to physically reflect them . . . so when they look to us they’ll see part of themselves in each of us.²¹

Another strategy is for prospective parents to select only one egg donor, but someone who is mixed race.²² If the collaborative reproduction is successful, either strategy could result in the couple not only having a child, but also an appearance of a “visually coherent family unit” that helps obscure from outsiders which of

(2007): 301-2.

²¹ Deborah Dempsey, “Surrogacy, Gay Male Couples and the Significance of Biogenetic Paternity,” *New Genetics and Society* 32, no. 1 (2013): 45.

²² Dean A. Murphy, *Gay Men Pursuing Parenthood Through Surrogacy: Reconfiguring Kinship* (Sydney, Australia: University of New South Wales, 2015), 152.

them is the bio-dad, therein preserving their family's privacy.²³

Cross-Border Reproductive Care of Asian Internationals to the US

One exception to the otherwise public "hiddenness" of Asian-raced persons' involvement with surrogacy in the US is the phenomenon of what has been called "maternity tourism" making occasional headline news. Given surrogacy's illegality in many European countries and heavy restrictions in Canada, the UK, and Australia, intended parents from several Asian countries find the US—and California especially—to be an attractive destination. California not only permits commercial surrogacy with no ceiling on compensation, but also recognizes the contracting couple's legal parentage at childbirth so long as there is a valid contract among the parties and the pre-birth order is filed correctly. Many foreigners also anticipate experiencing less stigma about their infertility and/or more welcoming attitudes and policies concerning LGBTQIA+ (a sizeable demographic of foreign IPs) in California compared to what they project they would experience at home. Finally, California has many ethnic enclaves and even fertility clinics and surrogacy agencies catering specifically to Asians. The latter often provides not just medical, but also translation, transportation, short-term lodging, and other logistical assistance. Some California-based surrogacy agencies report China as being the top sending country among their international clients. A combination of the previously mentioned factors, new wealth among Chinese professionals, a recent end to China's decades-long one-child policy, and the legal grey area of surrogacy at home has brought many Chinese IPs to US shores. Heads of surrogacy agencies with substantial Chinese clientele report Chinese foreigners preferring to work with white American surrogates—a phenomenon that upends the popular image of wealthy white intended parents using the bodies of poorer women of color or women from the global South.²⁴

Just as regular (non-surrogacy) birth or maternity tourism is already on the radar of scholars of legal and unauthorized immigration, cross-border surrogacy continues to raise related

²³ Murphy, *Gay Men Pursuing Parenthood Via Surrogacy*, 153. See, for instance, Dempsey, "Surrogacy, Gay Male Couples," 45–46.

²⁴ See, for example, Moira Weigel, "Made in America," *The New Republic*, October 10, 2017, <https://newrepublic.com/article/144982/made-america-chinese-couples-hiring-american-women-produce-babies>.

ethical and public policy questions about the wisdom or fairness of US immigration and naturalization policies. At issue is the Fourteenth Amendment's provision of birthright citizenship and the current ability for *all* citizen children to sponsor green cards for their (foreign) parents or sibling(s) when they reach the age of 21.²⁵ When interviewed, IPs from Asia and elsewhere have acknowledged the prospect of obtaining US passports for their children and the expanded opportunities that US citizenship would provide them to be an additional reason drawing them to American shores. The American College of Obstetrics and Gynecology (ACOG) has also recognized this incentive when attempting to account for the factors contributing to the popularity of the US as a destination for foreigners seeking cross-border reproductive care.²⁶ Whatever the reasons, transnational surrogacy now represents a tiny, but steadily growing way Asian Americans are being born to parents of considerable means. Whether the broader society will come to view persons of Asian descent born via maternity tourism as new kinds of "anchor babies" and what effects intercountry surrogacy will have on the broader Asian American community all remain to be seen—and likewise call out for further exploration and ethical analysis.

Cross-Border Reproductive Care of Americans and other Westerners to Asian Countries

The final point worth noting about Asian and Asian American experiences also involves intercountry surrogacy, but reverses the direction of travel: Americans, including Asian Americans, are going abroad to developing countries in Asia and elsewhere to meet their

²⁵ As Loretta Ross explains, there are "extremist elements" of the Republican party who seek to limit the Fourteenth Amendment's birthright-citizenship provision only to the children of US citizens in the hopes of denying US citizenship to all children born in the US to undocumented persons. If successful, Ross warns the Reproductive Justice implications of such a change in policy would be disastrous: such children would then "lose their basic human right to public services such as health care, various kinds of public assistance, and education," as they would become stuck in legal limbo, unable to obtain legal identity papers. See Loretta J. Ross and Rickie Solinger, *Reproductive Justice: An Introduction* (Oakland, CA: University of California Press, 2017), 215.

²⁶ American College of Obstetrics and Gynecologists (ACOG), "Committee Opinion: Family Building Through Surrogacy," No. 660, March 2016 (reaffirmed November 2019).

reproductive needs. India, for instance, used to be a prime destination for intercountry surrogacy in the early 2000s given its comparatively cheaper prices and lax policies. However, high-profile scandals and concerns about widespread exploitation prompted the nation to cease its services for foreign IPs in 2015. Something similar could be said about Thailand and Nepal; they once welcomed global “reproductive tourists” but later blocked them for a host of reasons converging upon concerns about harm. To be clear, intercountry surrogacy is not always motivated by cost savings. As per my earlier example of Chinese nationals hiring Californian surrogates, some IPs travel abroad not primarily because they are looking for a bargain, but because they are precluded from accessing reproductive services at home. As several commentators have noted, they are less “reproductive tourists” than “reproductive exiles” who cross borders due to restrictive eligibility requirements (e.g., they are single, unmarried, or in a same-sex relationship) for adoption or surrogacy, a partial or total ban on surrogacy, or overly restrictive ART insurance coverage policies, or long waiting lists that they face at home. In light of various push-pull factors for transnational surrogacy, we can expect this pattern of changing “hot spots” to continue. When one jurisdiction closes its surrogacy doors, other markets quickly emerge to take its place.

Conclusion

Whatever the varied reasons for Asian Americans’ (and others’) participation in surrogacy, they become accountable to the multiple ethical issues the practice raises. Many of these fears center on harming or exploiting the women who would “rent out” their wombs to others for pay, particularly since it is widely assumed they would only be incurring the inconveniences and higher risks of an IVF-pregnancy (in gestational arrangements) for strangers because they have no other ways of earning a comparable sum. I will explore next how Asian American feminist Bible scholars and theologians might help us think through the ethics of financial inducements in surrogacy through the story of Ruth.

Asian American Theological Reflections on Ruth as Applied to Surrogacy Today

Scholars and religious adherents have interpreted Ruth's story in multiple ways, including it being about righteous Gentiles, exile and return, land and *goel* ("redeemer"), foreigners and exogamy, women's relationships and precarity, and surrogacy. To this last point, scholars, including Kwok Pui-lan, Gale Yee, and Sharon Jacob, have acknowledged how Ruth the Moabite can be read as a traditional surrogate, her eventual husband Boaz as an intended father, and her Judahite mother-in-law, Naomi, as an intended mother. The biblical texts clearly depict Naomi as the architect behind Ruth's relationship with Boaz. The biblical passages also describe Naomi as nursing the child Ruth bore and the townspeople referring to Obed as Naomi's—not Ruth's—son (Ruth 4:16-17).

Asian American Feminist Readings of Ruth

Though there are obvious differences between Ruth's surrogacy and contemporary surrogacy arrangements, Ruth's relationships with Naomi and Boaz can illumine the latter through their relevance to two types of surrogacies today: "altruistic" (non-compensated) and "commercial" (compensated). Like "altruistic" surrogates, Ruth's following of whatever Naomi asked of her to do apparently stemmed from her love and loyalty to her: witness Ruth's heartfelt pledge "Where you go, I will go; where you lodge, I will lodge; your people shall be my people, and your God my God" (Ruth 1:16-17; 3:6). Like "commercial" surrogates, however, Ruth also stood to gain financially through pregnancy and childbirth. As an indigent, childless widow and foreigner from a despised people, Ruth might also have heeded Naomi's instructions, including approaching Boaz seductively on the threshing floor, so she and Naomi could be provided with a home and financial security (Ruth 3:1; cf. 2:1, 4:9-10). Reading Ruth's actions alongside of surrogacy practices today allows us to explore the meaning of consent in the context of economic desperation and what relationships are possible between infertile intended mothers and their younger, fertile surrogates.

Hong Kong-born Kwok Pui-lan, third-generation Chinese American Gale Yee, and self-described "Indian immigrant living in

the United States”²⁷ Sharon Jacob, are all feminist scholars of Asian heritage in the US who offer different responses to those musings. In a 1994 publication, Kwok originally viewed the covenant between those “two women of difference races and religions” as expressing “the deepest commitment and solidarity between persons.” In our world of enduring religious and racial conflict, she hoped the Ruth-Naomi relationship would serve as a “guide . . . and motivate us to work for justice that is inclusive of all the peoples concerned.”²⁸ In a later publication, however, Kwok’s interests in immigration, relationships between foreigners and immigrants, and identity formation in the US prompted her to revisit her earlier interpretation and critically canvass multiple readings of the book of Ruth. Kwok therein acknowledges how emphasizing “female friendship and bonding” by some feminist scholars, including in her earlier work, can decontextualize the story by insufficiently attending to Ruth’s “leaving home,” asymmetrical power relations between mothers-in-law and daughters-in-law, and the difficulties of “maintaining an interethnic or interracial relationship.”²⁹

Gale Yee is more suspicious about the relationships among the principal characters than Kwok was even in her later reflections. When Yee reads Ruth through an Asian American lens of the “perpetual foreigner” stereotype,³⁰ she views not only Boaz but also Naomi as “liv[ing] off the labor of Ruth the foreigner,” first by Ruth’s physical labor (since Boaz owns the land on which Ruth worked tirelessly and Naomi directs Ruth to “continue the nonstop work of gleaning”), and then with their use of Ruth sexually and

²⁷ Sharon Jacob, *Reading Mary Alongside Indian Surrogate Mothers: Violent Love, Oppressive Liberation, and Infancy Narratives* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015), xviii.

²⁸ Kwok Pui-lan, “The Future of Feminist Theology: An Asian Perspective,” in *Feminist Theology from the Third World: A Reader*, ed. Ursula King (New York: Orbis, 1994), 71–72.

²⁹ Kwok, “Finding Ruth a Home,” 109, 111.

³⁰ Yee also provides a reading of Ruth through the other dominant stereotype for Asian Americans, the “model minority,” wherein Ruth becomes a “model emigrée” and accordingly an “exemplar” of “female empowerment, initiative, hard work, family loyalty, and upward mobility.” Gale Yee, “She Stood in Tears Amid the Alien Corn’: Ruth, the Perpetual Foreigner and Model Minority,” in *They Were All Together in One Place? Toward Minority Biblical Criticism*, eds. Randall C. Bailey, Tatt-siong Benny Liew, and Fernando F. Segovia (Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2009), 133–34.

reproductively.³¹ Yee underscores both Boaz's ability to "trump" another kinsman's better claim to the land "by means of Ruth's body," and Naomi's directives to Ruth to "make herself attractive to seduce a man" to advance her [Naomi's] strategic goal of "preserv[ing] the lineage of her husband" (through levirate marriage) and ultimately take "Ruth's child as her own."³² Importantly for our purposes, Yee offers this "perpetual foreigner" reading of Ruth as an indictment against those of us "in the First World who exploit the cheap labor of developing countries and poor immigrants from those countries who come . . . looking for jobs."³³

Finally, Sharon Jacob offers a third reading that blends elements of the previous two while introducing important novelties. She reads Ruth and several other "scandalous women" in Matthew's genealogy of Jesus alongside contemporary surrogate mothers in India, with an aim of offering a more nuanced conception of motherhood in both contexts.³⁴ Jacob compares the pressures Ruth felt to secure her and Naomi's well-being through the use of her body because they had no other way of fending for themselves to poor Indian surrogate mothers whose family members also reportedly coax them to participate in an act of "irregular conception": both Ruth and these Indian surrogates transgress traditional patriarchal and sexual norms. Rather than regard them one-sidedly as victims oppressed by their circumstances, however, Jacob draws upon Chanda Talpade Mohanty's warning against a Western tendency to portray either colonial subjects or contemporary women in the global South as entirely exploited or powerless.³⁵ Because the decision to bear a child for another in the biblical passages or in postcolonial India is or was tied to hope for a better future, Jacob underscores complex agency at work: these women willingly agree to perform reproductive labor so "they can exploit the societies that exploit them."³⁶ Jacob, in sum, views both Ruth and Indian surrogate mothers as experiencing an "exploited-exploitive motherhood" as they elect to "use their own bodies and

³¹ Yee, "She Stood in Tears Amid the Alien Corn," 131.

³² Deut 25: 5-10; Yee, "She Stood in Tears Amid the Alien Corn," 131.

³³ Yee, "She Stood in Tears Amid the Alien Corn," 134.

³⁴ Matt 1:17; Jacob, *Reading Mary Alongside Indian Surrogate Mothers*, 147.

³⁵ Jacob, *Reading Mary Alongside Indian Surrogate Mothers*, xv.

³⁶ Jacob, *Reading Mary Alongside Indian Surrogate Mothers*, 61.

use the system that dares to prey on their powerlessness and poverty."³⁷

Connecting Asian American Feminist Readings of Ruth to Surrogacy Today

Even if written for other purposes, these three readings of Ruth can illuminate different facets of surrogacy today. The close relationship Kwok finds between Ruth and Naomi—surrogate and IM—in her first reading mirrors what numerous social scientists have found when studying contemporary intra-state surrogacy relationships in the US, UK, Canada, Australia, and Israel. According to social scientific and ethnographic research on the surrogacy triad, a surrogate typically does *not* bond with the child she is carrying, but with the intended parents—especially the intended mother—even in remunerated arrangements where the parties were previously strangers. Though surrogates show awareness of the class differences between them and the people commissioning them, they do not typically report feeling exploited by the exchange. They do, however, occasionally experience relational stress or conflict over differences arising over prenatal care or the birth plan due to the intended parents' desire to exert some control in a situation ultimately beyond their control—a point mirroring Kwok's later reflections on Ruth about needing to attend to power dynamics. Some surrogates also report preferring not to partner with foreign intended mothers because of real or perceived linguistic or cultural barriers. Kwok's dual readings of Ruth thus capture important dimensions of contemporary surrogacy arrangements: friendship is possible and even quite common in some contexts, but the relationships are not without their share of tensions and conflict; additionally, some otherwise possible transnational surrogate-IP relationships do not form due to difficulties some surrogates project in having to navigate cross-cultural differences.³⁸

³⁷ Jacob, *Reading Mary Alongside Indian Surrogate Mothers*, xv.

³⁸ Many of these observations are substantiated by the first ethnographic study of surrogate motherhood in the US: Helen Ragoné, *Surrogate Motherhood: Conception in the Heart* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1994). For more on these studies, see also Kao, "Toward a Feminist Christian Vision of Gestational Surrogacy," 165–68 and Kao, "My Body, Their Baby."

In turn, both Yee's reading of Ruth's exploitation and Jacob's reading of Ruth's complex agency are mirrored in the literature on the ethics of commercial surrogacy arrangements, particularly when global Northerners travel to the global South to meet their reproductive needs for a cheaper price. To be sure, many surrogacy critics allege exploitation in even intrastate cases in the US, but most reputable US fertility clinics and surrogacy agencies screen out acutely indigent women on public assistance from serving as surrogates to circumvent bad public relations; preclude scenarios where the prospective candidates' poverty, which is often bundled with low education, would impair their ability to provide informed consent; avoid compromising the governmental assistance such women already receive (since welfare recipients must report all sources of income); and increase their clinic's success rates given the connection between indigency and poor health. Yee's reading of Ruth's story through the lens of First World-developing countries' relations would likely have us viewing most IPs in transnational surrogacy arrangements as exploiting the vulnerabilities and inferior socioeconomic status of any woman they would hire. In contrast, Jacob's interpretation would resist a reading of surrogates in developing countries as merely tragic victims or dupes. She would instead encourage us to view them as cognizant of their limited choices, aware that any decision to participate in a pregnancy transgressing traditional, patriarchal norms would come with social and physical costs – but also the potential for significant financial (and thus also social) rewards, which is why some agree to sign on.

Surrogacy and Reproductive Justice

Asian American Christian ethicists with a progressive orientation to social issues who are looking for additional, fresh sources of moral wisdom concerning surrogacy or other ART would do well to turn to the “reproductive justice” (RJ) framework. The term “reproductive justice” was first coined by 12 pioneering Black women in the US in 1994 at a conference in Chicago co-sponsored by the Illinois Pro-Choice Alliance and Ms. Foundation. They initially hoped to respond to the Clinton administration's proposed plans for healthcare reform and center the needs of Black women in anticipation of the upcoming UN International Conference on Population and Development (ICPD) in Cairo. These women, who

would soon call themselves the “Women of African Descent for Reproductive Justice” (WADRJ), had judged the dominant “pro-choice” platform to be insufficiently attentive to the structural barriers in their lives, where the central question was not whether the law protected reproductive *choice*, but whether they as Black women could properly *access* or exercise such rights, if so. Sixteen organizations representing women of color from four mini-communities—Native American, African American, Latina, and Asian American—formed the SisterSong Women of Color Reproductive Justice collective in 1997 and have developed the RJ framework further. RJ has thus been both a grassroots movement and one linked to global women’s health in its understanding of the interrelationships between and among “poverty, underdevelopment and women’s reproduction.”³⁹

Asian Pacific Islanders for Reproductive Health (APIRH) was one of the founding organizations of SisterSong, and when APIRH renamed itself as Asian Communities for Reproductive Justice (ACRJ) in 2004, it became the first original SisterSong member organization to have “rebrand[ed] itself using the phrase ‘reproductive justice.’”⁴⁰ ACRJ’s “New Vision for Advancing Our Movement for Reproductive Health, Reproductive Rights and Reproductive Justice” outlines three main frameworks in RJ for addressing reproductive oppression. The first, Reproductive Health, focuses on delivering a full range of health services in culturally competent and accessible (low cost or no-cost) ways. The second, Reproductive Rights, focuses on legal and public policy advocacy to protect the legal right to reproductive health care services. The third, Reproductive Justice, is movement building in its promotion of RJ in connection with the broader social justice struggle of communities toward self-determination, the transformation of structural power inequities, and realization of human rights.

The collective experiences and wisdom of RJ scholar-activists hold exciting possibilities for thinking through the ethics of surrogacy. Its centering of women of color bridges the rich tradition of feminist, womanist, and postcolonial reflections on biblical surrogacy narratives with contemporary fears many people still

³⁹ Toni M. Bond, “Laying the Foundations for a Reproductive Justice Movement,” in *Radical Reproductive Justice: Foundations, Theory, Practice, Critique*, eds. Loretta J. Ross et al. (New York: The Feminist Press, 2017), 43.

⁴⁰ Bond, “Laying the Foundations for a Reproductive Justice Movement,” 48.

have about women of color in the US and poor women in the global South turning to commercial surrogacy because they need the money. Its four-pronged understanding of the rights everyone should be recognized as having might also be read in ways supportive of some surrogacy arrangements. Finally, its longstanding intersectional approach to social issues, warnings that the risks of pregnancy vary dramatically by race, and community-centered ethos for advocacy, should push anyone seeking to assess the ethics of surrogacy to provide context- and community-specific analyses and guidance—as Asian American Christian ethics as a subfield is committed to doing. RJ’s requirement to look beyond individual reproductive choices and decisions to the broader social contexts in which they occur is a fitting complement to the attention Christian social ethicists are tasked to pay to systemic and structural analyses.

To be clear, RJ activists are most known for advocating for a host of issues in reproductive and sexual health—abortion, contraception, sex education, STI prevention, prenatal care, domestic violence assistance, support for persons experiencing reproductive loss, and so forth—but not so much for infertility treatments or ART. Still, a core human right RJ recognizes—the “right to have a child”—in my judgment provides room not only for discrete individuals to elect to become either surrogates or intended parents, but also for activists to advocate for the structural changes and social conditions necessary for everyone to have real opportunities to decide. The latter might accordingly involve laws regulating surrogacy to protect the interests of multiple parties and assistance for persons of modest financial means to gain access to otherwise out-of-reach infertility treatments and/or otherwise expensive and logistically complex adoption proceedings. Dr. Toni Bond, one of the 12 founding foremothers of RJ, also sees the potential for RJ’s affirmation of the right for everyone to have a child to be read positively, not just negatively—as a right requiring the state to actively aid, not merely refrain from interfering, in a persons’ attempt to “found a family,” to use the phrase from the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (Article 23.2). That several women in Bond’s qualitative study of the sexual and reproductive herstories of Black Protestant Christian women revealed they would have considered ART—even surrogacy—if they had had the economic means to do so is one reason why she would like to see the

RJ movement spend more time researching how Black and other women of color respond to infertility, advocate for infertility treatments to become more accessible and affordable, and explore the compatibility of RJ and surrogacy.⁴¹

Finally, what the RJ framework both offers and insists we provide on this or any other reproductive topic is context-sensitivity. When applied to surrogacy as it intersects with Asian American realities, an RJ framing would legitimately permit us to respond with “it depends” to the question of whether commercial surrogacy arrangements in general or even transnational agreements in particular are exploitative or otherwise a bad idea. As sociologist Amrita Pande has argued in the first book-length ethnography on India’s surrogacy industry, critics insisting on a “surrogacy is exploitative” framing should actually compare the work of surrogacy to other employment opportunities Indian women actually have, with one of her points being that surrogacy in India at the time of her research was allowing women to earn significantly more than most other jobs available to them—or even their husbands.⁴² The attention to local conditions required by RJ means we should not be surprised if we ultimately make one ethical judgment about gay male Chinese IPs hiring white California surrogates who generally receive state-of-the-art prenatal care and the highest compensation in the world, and perhaps another judgment about white infertile American couples traveling to places in the global South, such as Laos, because of its lower costs and lack of laws or restrictions on collaborative reproduction. As Alison Bailey has argued, an RJ lens will push us to assess surrogacy industries or practices contextually in light of the jurisdiction’s record on women’s health and maternal morbidity, whether the same vulnerable populations historically targeted for sterilization are now being encouraged to become pregnant for others, the quality and length of postpartum care offered to surrogates, and whether surrogacy allows some women to receive better reproductive health

⁴¹ Toni M. Bond, “Faithful Voices: Creating a Womanist Theo-Ethic of Reproductive Justice” (PhD diss., Claremont School of Theology, 2020). Loretta Ross, a co-founder of SisterSong, is more cautious and skeptical about surrogacy in particular and ART in general from a RJ perspective. See Ross, *Reproductive Justice: An Intro*, 208–12.

⁴² Amrita Pande, *Wombs in Labor: Transnational Commercial Surrogacy in India* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2014).

care when they are pregnant for others for pay than when they are for themselves.⁴³ At the same time, my view is that we should take seriously the self-understandings of these women who become pregnant for others and not paternalistically seek to dissuade them from performing reproductive labor for others if certain baseline conditions, including informed consent, have been met, and the arrangements take place under contexts protecting the rights and interests of all parties.⁴⁴

Conclusion

An Asian American Christian ethical approach to surrogacy is one that not only focuses on the many ways Asian Americans are already involved in and affected by this unconventional way of expanding families, but also highlights Asian American and other minoritized scholarship on surrogacy and related topics in the process. I have offered here a way for Asian Americans to turn to Asian American theological reflections on the book of Ruth on the one hand and the wisdom of the reproductive justice framework on the other when thinking through some ethical questions generated by surrogacy practices. Other Asian American Christian ethical approaches to surrogacy could be given if the theorists started with assumptions different from the ones animating my approach, which affirms the equal good of both same-sex and straight parenting and delinks sex from reproduction.

My Asian American Christian ethics approach to surrogacy is also premised upon present realities. Should uterine transplant surgery progress beyond the experimental stage of clinical trials, should ectogenesis (gestation outside of a biological womb) in humans become possible one day, or should we learn something about adverse long-term health effects of IVF which we do not now know, we would need to reassess the bioethics of surrogacy in light of this new information and these other possibilities. Likewise, should present realities, interests, or concerns change within the Asian American community or across the Asia/Pacific so as to

⁴³ Alison Bailey, "Reconceiving Surrogacy: Toward a Reproductive Justice Account of Indian Surrogacy," *Hypatia* 26, no. 4 (2011): 715–41.

⁴⁴ It is beyond the scope of this essay to flesh out all the conditions and parameters that must be obtained, in my judgment, before any given surrogacy arrangement is judged ethical. I provide a framework of guiding principles and best practices for surrogacy in my forthcoming book, *My Body, Their Baby*.

render portions of the analysis provided here moot or dated, we would likewise need to modify our Asian American Christian ethical analysis. Asian American Christian ethics, in short, is a dynamic enterprise and as topics in bioethics are ever evolving, so, too, is the field.

Towards Solidarity and World-Making Otherwise¹

Wonhee Anne Joh

"A past conditional temporality suggests that there were other conditions of possibility that were vanquished by liberal political reason and its promises of freedom, and it suggests means to open those conditions to pursue what might have been....We are left with the project of imagining mourning, and reckoning 'other humanities' within the received genealogy of 'the human.'"

Lisa Lowe, *Intimacies of Four Continents*

How do our still-present pasts continue to haunt us? How is it that the place we have left continues to haunt us even as we try with every effort to belong to a new place, despite its latent and sometimes overt hostility? History presents forms of powerful spectral reality and forms of spectral witnessing (for example feelings of being "out of place") that help us recognize dormant ghosts of our past lives. No totalizing reach of dominant forces can ultimately and permanently repress or erase other truths and realities.² Haunting memories allow us to re-member these always vibrating, simmering, and shadowed spectral presences. Edward Said's memoir, *Out of Place*, stirred memories that I had long forgotten or had buried as I trudged through my immigrant life. Though he wrote as a Palestinian exile, his recollections found resonance in my life and experience as a Korean American immigrant. I, too, have often felt the desolate feeling of not belonging, of being here but not quite here, visible but not quite visible, accepted but not quite accepted, not quite white but not brown enough. Like Said, for whom the history of Palestine was and is fraught with a sense political ambush by dominant powers, I am also haunted by the colonial pasts of Korean history and Korea's

¹ A previous iteration of this essay first appeared in the *Journal of Religion, Race and Ethnicity*.

² William V. Spanos, *American Exceptionalism in the Age of Globalization: The Specter of Vietnam* (New York: State University of New York Press, 2008).

struggle with dominating powers. Though I have lived most of my life in the US and did not directly experience the Japanese colonization of Korea, the traumas of the Korean War, or the ongoing US occupation of Korea, it is stunning to recognize just how much these historical events continue not only to haunt people who directly experienced them but also to reproduce the traumatic effects of such historical legacies in ways often unbidden by latter generations. As Avery Gordon has noted, such a possibility of a collectively animated worldly memory is “articulated in extraordinary moments in which you—who never was there in that real place—can bump into a rememory that belongs to somebody else . . . or something else in the world is remembering you.”³ The question that I repeatedly find myself asking recently is, “Why now?”

Similar to Said’s experience, my intense feeling of being “out of place” has not vanished, but has dogged me persistently. However, though this feeling has persisted, it is no longer such a stabbing, sharp pain, or a nagging discomfort that demands a resolution. Rather, my journey has led me to realize that the state of being “unhomed” presents an epistemological gift. This epistemological gift is an unexpected one—a conditionality that makes possible a radical openness to the unsettling “unhomedness” of others. This epistemology, a way of thinking otherwise, continues to be a turn away from privileging the West’s epistemology and its taken-for-granted normativity of liberalism as the starting point.

The future of Asian American theology is located in a theological nexus, which envisions a future by negotiating diverse and multiple points of reference, dancing together contrapuntally. For some, the many and different notes within the ever-expanding scope of Asian American theology may seem unharmonious and counterproductive, but for many of us it can only be polyvalent, despite its many different and sometimes contradictory voices. In this way, Asian American theological thinking transforms theology non-coercively and generously with a utopian cast by recognizing the worldliness of all theological reflection.

By deploying Said’s notion of contrapuntal reading as a method, this essay might be seen as a fugue, requiring at times an

³ Avery Gordon, *Ghostly Matters: Haunting and the Sociological Imagination* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997), 166.

assemblage of contrasting and contradictory moves. In particular, I bring into relation the following three complex contrapuntal dimensions: (1) it moves from sites of Asian America, to Asia, back to Asian America—specifically drawing from Korean American experience; (2) it moves from Asian America to its neglected but potent implicature in African America, Latino/a America's colonial struggles; and (3) it explores a variety of viewpoints accented by the interplay of dynamics of race, gender, sexuality and globalization. In so doing, I hope to display the tapestry of thinking within which an Asian American theology works, as well as indicating diverse reference points that postcolonial Asian American theologians might further examine, accentuating a non-totalizing ethico-political imaginative vision of the world.

Postcolonial Critique as a Form of Dissensual Practice: The Postcolonial and the Decolonial

"It is possible to define a certain dissensual practice of philosophy as an activity of de-classification that undermines all policing of domains and formulas. It does so not for the sole pleasure of deconstructing the master's discourse, but in order to think the lines according to which boundaries and passages are constructed, according to which they are conceivable and modifiable. . . . Engaging in critique of the instituted divisions, then, paves the way for renewing our interrogations into what we are able to think and to do."

Jacques Rancière, *Dissensus: On Politics and Aesthetics*

Postcolonialism is a discourse that emerged after the period of colonization. However, this is not to say that the rise of nation-states "post" declarations of independence from colonization has led to decolonization. Conceivably, formal colonization has ended in many places, but the conditions of coloniality, its range and scope, are operative ever more efficiently today. In fact, one can argue that conditions of coloniality have become sophisticated and intricately woven into the very desires of those who were once colonized. The work of decolonization can no longer be expected to happen in any clear and precise manner so that a clear and final meta-revolutionary blow might give birth to a new epoch. Rather, decolonization or "deimperialization" can only take place in a dialectical movement in which intersecting movements to decolonize occur simultaneously in multiple sites.

The presence of the US in most parts of Asia in recent history cannot be examined in its totality here, but it has been determinative

in many ways. Some of the consequences of this presence continue to haunt not only those in Asia but also in the US—and not only Asian Americans. Because of this interwoven history, postcolonial discourse can become a strategic reading of Asian American experience in the US and thus suggest ways that identity formations emerge within a complex global nexus of relations of power. Specifically, this is to suggest that Asian American identities are formed continuously within the relational flow and flux of global dynamics, not just in isolation and within the boundaries of the US nation-state. The identities involve constructed domains and formulas that are both physical and epistemological. In this, there is also recognition that given boundaries and borders are constructed as well as “naturalized” in colonial projects. I suggest too that postcolonial critique is, at its best, a form of what Rancière terms “dissensual practice,”⁴ wielded by those who continue to envision a decolonial world. I am reading the “post” in “postcolonial” as necessitating a critique—a dissensus—that envisions a *decolonial* world. As dissensual practice, postcolonial critique interrogates the limits and boundaries of not only what we believe to be given, but also what we are sanctioned to imagine. In other words, not only does postcolonial critique examine the effects and affects of coloniality in the history of various peoples, but it also interrogates the always-already-assumed “givenness” and “rightness” of notions such as the following: democracy, human rights, capitalism, communism, globalization, development, love, salvation, rights and wrongs, and virtues and vices. Postcolonial critique seeks to decolonize these often-assumed goods, not through some search for the native but by dismantling metanarratives of identitarianism and of the on-going imperial reach that pervades the innermost reaches of our very desires, nostalgia, and hopes. The goal is not to ferret out and pinpoint the exact location of colonial damage; rather, one of postcolonial critique’s ongoing interests is an examination of the intermingling effect and affect in past and present colonial practices by both the colonizers and the colonized. As this envisions decolonized worlds, it then also is as much about the future as it is about the past.

⁴ Jacques Rancière, *Dissensus: On Politics and Aesthetics* (New York: Continuum, 2010).

Asian American identities are thus not shaped solely by their relation to “America” or by the singularity of “Asia,” but are constituted by what it means to be part of the imagined geo-political dynamics of Asian and American, Asia and the US. In this regard, Asian American theological thinking must transgress the given boundaries and limits already erected by the past. Transgression means to cross over. It is a “moving from one domain to another, the testing and challenging of limits, the mixing and intermingling of heterogeneities, cutting across expectations, providing unforeseen pleasures, discoveries, experience.”⁵ For Asian American theological reflections, this assumes a radical critique of the imperial metaphysical logic of the West—both ontological and epistemological—that colonized most of our own structure of thinking and knowing. As philosopher William Spanos, a noted critic of Edward Said’s work, writes, “If there is any single motif that subsumes the last thirty years’ various oppositional discourses, whether philosophical, cultural, or sociopolitical, it is the indefinite but very real notion of some other reality that, try as the custodians of the truth might to annul ‘it’, always returns to haunt this global truth.”⁶ Dominant and dominating logics, which are imperialist, ontological, and epistemological, cannot forever subdue the return of the repressed that gives shape to the world that is still to come.

To that end, Said’s notions of fugue and contrapuntality are suggested as useful metaphors. Fugue is a metaphor that helps us to understand not only the integrity of singularity but also that of plurality. In music, fugue/fuga is a polyphonic composition described as texture rather than form. It is a contrapuntal composition in which many voices enter, then fade, and re-enter, and often overlap with one another. Fugue is a musical practice that can become a useful theological practice that suggests possibilities and conditions that might make singularity and plurality possible even as it recognizes interdependent histories that point toward textual sociality. Contrapuntal productivity is an intellectual practice traversing interdependent linkages and histories, seeking a kind of ever shifting but still textured sociality. Contrapuntality as reading against the grain blurs the line of center/periphery, East/West, and citizen/non-citizen by questioning assumed

⁵ Edward Said, *Musical Elaborations* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1991).

⁶ William V. Spanos, *The Legacy of Edward Said* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2009), 225.

binaries so that one begins to recognize the depth of our worldliness—the inevitable fact of hybrid nature of all cultures and identities. Postcolonial contrapuntal reading of US history, then, sheds light on how race, imperialism, colonization, gender, and sexuality all work to form the ideal “American” that often did not and does not include Asian Americans in the dominant white imaginary. Ironically, this simultaneous exclusion and inclusion gives birth to ever newly-regenerated notions of who that idealized “American” is to be, which often continues not to be extended to Asian Americans, or for that matter to many who are not white. Providing whites with a ready alibi is the myth of the Model Minority (myths of inclusivity). It also has a way of providing a false sense of honorary whiteness for some Asian Americans, which is a false sense of acceptance into whiteness. And as much as I would like to think that the Model Minority notion is just a myth that is resisted and actively disavowed and opposed by Asian Americans, I find that there are Asian Americans who accept and believe in their exceptionality—that as model minorities they are exceptional from among other minorities in this country and much closer to the American ideal than other minorities. As Vijay Prashad has noted, “The immigrant seeks a form of vertical assimilation, to climb from the lowest, darkest echelon on the stepladder of tyranny into the bright whiteness. . . . Asians and Latinos have all tried to barter their varied cultural worlds for the privileges of whiteness.”⁷ On the other hand, we cannot blithely ignore various extenuating and often complex ways in which multiple reference points are held and negotiated delicately and intentionally by Asian Americans in the formation of their very plural subjectivity. Rather than seek vertical integration, there are those who instead intentionally cultivate and nurture a horizontal assimilation.⁸ Cultivation of horizontal violence would involve a working across and with multiple sites of racial/ethnic communities and others who are continually marginalized to form collaborative alliances and mutual understanding. Because of the intense, so-called interventionist presence of the US in much of Asia, Asian and American formations are in most cases co-constitutive of each other through shared multiple reference points, simultaneously bringing about the

⁷ Vijay Prashad, *Everybody Was Kung Fu Fighting: Afro-Asian Connections and the Myth of Cultural Purity* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2001), x.

⁸ Prashad, *Everybody Was Kung Fu Fighting*, x.

shattering force of the new with what seems like dissonance. In this regard, it is not only unjust but also dangerous to continue to view Asian American formation as separate from the intersecting histories of Asia and the histories of US intervention and presence throughout Asia. Said's notion of contrapuntality/fugue is a helpful methodological vision because it combines the complexity of an ever-shifting, differentiated singular/plural world on the one hand, with a pervasive sense of "over-againstness" – similar to Ranciere's dissensus practice – on the other.

Dissensual practice is cognizant of Spivak's "axiomatics of imperialism," in which one's complicity in the economic and social structures of so-called interventionist/imperialist presence should not be neglected. Contrapuntal reading as one form of dissensus practice opens up a space in which one's own epistemological foundations (often trained in assumptions of Western Enlightenment) can be transgressed. Postcolonial theory (and theology more specifically) must be attentive to the possibility and danger of becoming unmoored from the task of decolonization. Because the "post" in the postcolonial often inadvertently connotes an aftermath or an end of a colonial era, it can result in misleading conclusions that the postcolonial era is free of any lingering colonial consequences. It is thus paramount for postcolonial critique to employ a decolonial tactic (or to use Malini Johar Schueller's notion, to become a "resistance postcolonialism") in which dissensual practice is a crucial part of the on-going analyses of what seems to be a continually-morphing of former colonial practices into ever new and shifting global theories and practices of globalization.

We can then respond to Kandice Chuh's question: "What is specifically useful about postcolonial and postcoloniality as critical terms of Asian Americanist analysis?"⁹ Modified with theology in mind, we might ask the question in this manner: What is useful about postcolonial and postcoloniality as critical terms for Asian American theological reflection? Any response to this latter question must address the fundamental form of dissensual practice that is at the heart of any postcolonial theological project—a project that is always already attuned to a contrapuntal reading of a textured world.

⁹ Kandice Chuh, *Imagine Otherwise: On Asian Americanist Critique* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2003), 117.

Postcoloniality Between Asia and Asian America

"If . . . there must be a dialectical process in any deimperialization movement, then what conditions need to be created in the United States to bring about an effective movement there?"

Kuan-Hsing Chen, *Asia As Method*

What are the conditions of possibility for Asians in America? Most Asian American studies have tended to focus on the Asian in American. While the need for historical recollections of Asians and their roles in the US is crucial, such historical reconstructions have tended to focus solely on the domestic parameters of the US nation-state. This is not enough. The complexity marking conditions of possibility for the diverse lives of Asians in the US in the past, present, and the future must be examined and reconstructed with closer scrutiny of what happened/s in the US and, at the same time, with the US' involvement elsewhere. For example, our recent domestic policy on immigration cannot be fully understood without understanding the historical underpinning of not only our domestic record of anti-immigration violence, but also US involvement in countries around the world. Postcolonial theorist Gayatri C. Spivak writes that "war is an alibi every imperialism has given . . . and a civilizing mission carried to the extreme."¹⁰ US involvement in Asia is numerous and devastating, and Asian American experiences cannot be coherently or fully understood apart from the analysis of US involvement in those countries. For example, Asian American scholar Jodi Kim notes how important it is to conceptualize Asian American critique and cultural politics in ways that "mark the contradictions and ambivalent entanglements of American empire and gendered racial formations as the context out of which the post-World War II Asian American subject emerges and constitutes itself as such."¹¹ Thus, speaking and articulating meanings for Asian American subject formation cannot be done apart from the deeper examination of their connections to Asians' experiences of US empire in Asia. Asian American experience therefore is directly linked to the ways that Asia has experienced the US and vice versa. Whether it is in the Philippines, Korea, Japan, or Vietnam, US involvement in those countries has left a mark on not just Asian and

¹⁰ Gayatri C. Spivak, "Terror: A Speech After 9-11," *boundary* 31, no. 2 (2004): 94.

¹¹ Jodi Kim, *Ends of Empire: Asian American Critique and the Cold War* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2010), 7.

Asian American subjects but also on the dominant US imaginary. This is not to say that Asia remains unchanged or innocent of imperial dynamics; analysis also implicates Asia with its own—to use Chen’s term—“subimperial” projects. For example, Korea’s imperial desires are manifested in various parts of the globe where the economic power can be exploited by Korea. Globalized Korean transnational capitalist forces can be found at work exploiting both laborers and the natural resources of these places. Furthermore, in the case of Korea, they are not only going elsewhere (as is Mexico) to practice their subimperial desires. Reflecting US imperial desires, Koreans are also now facing phenomenal growth in the numbers of non-Korean laborers working and living in Korea, many of whom were legally allowed to come into Korea to serve needs not being met by Koreans themselves. The cultural, political, and social conditions [and suffering] with which these migrant workers and increasingly large populations of permanent Korean residents live are appalling to say the least. While economically exploited, these people face racism and xenophobia living among Koreans. Just as Asian American analysis of US imperial designs is a complex endeavor, one that involves a simultaneous analysis of relations of power that spread around the world, any analysis of Asia must recognize that Asia, too, is a complex constellation of regional historical enmities and conflicts that must be addressed. Asia is not some “pure” and “innocent” bystander victimized by US empire. While the victimization of Korea by the US is a crucial dynamic, Asia also has been complicit with aiding and abetting US imperial designs elsewhere. It is important to ask why this ongoing relationship between Korea and the US is an important site of analysis for examining influences that shape the conditions of possibility for Koreans in Korea as well as of Koreans in US. For Asian Americans often caught in the tangled web of anti-Asian and anti-Black racism, we must not only make demands but also do the difficult task of intersectional reading of histories, of militarized racializing colonial projects that often relied on constructing fictive and contested narratives about who we are in relation to each other because, who “we” are, depends on absolving our aiding and abetting in the consequences of those fictive narratives about each other.

How the US imaginary constructs its understanding of Korea and of Koreans in Korea has a direct impact on ways that Koreans in America are understood and treated. It is part of the racism borne by

Koreans (and by other Asian Americans) that most US citizens cannot differentiate between Korean Americans and Koreans. For example, there have been more instances than I can recount in which I am treated as if I am a foreigner and not an American citizen. Moreover, I am also viewed as a victimized foreigner who needs and continues to need US benevolent rescue. This latter construct allows for a whole slew of racist stereotypes to continue to operate and recycle in the psyches of the dominant US collective. This ensures not only that the positionality of Koreans in Korea remains frozen in time and place, but it also requires constructs of Korean Americans in the dominant US imaginary to remain stagnant. By challenging this singularity and instead seeking multiple reference points, Asian American scholars transform the way we understand Asia, Asian America, and the US, always in the nexus of relations of power. As Carlos Bulosan in his 1943 book, *America is in the Heart*, wrote, "I know deep down in my heart that I am an exile in America. I feel like a criminal running away from a crime that I did not commit. And this crime is that I am a Filipino in America." Another scholar far from his home, Said may have felt similarly as a person who could not return to his home, that of Palestine, when he wrote,

exile is strangely compelling to think about but terrible to experience. It is the unhealable rift forced between a human being and a native place, between the self and its true home: its essential sadness can never be surmounted. And, while it is true that literature and history contain heroic, romantic, glorious, even triumphant episodes in an exile's life, these are no more than efforts meant to overcome the crippling sorrow of estrangement.¹²

The primary violence of colonialism, according to Said, was geographical violence, the taking of land and resources from indigenous peoples. The first act of colonialism then is to dispossess and displace peoples from intimate and familiar place/land. Not only psychic but also physical spatial colonialism was and continues to be the first act of colonial and neocolonialism. In the act of dispossession, a rationale for the "civilized colonizer" is necessary, and it is from this that fictive and imagined discourse about its "other" are consolidated, sedimented, naturalized, and become

¹² Edward Said, *Reflections on Exile and Other Essays* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2002), 173.

“common sense.” This invention of its others begs the question of whether the idea of the West was even possible without the construction of its other, the rest of us. A possible beginning intervention into this presumed normalized way of seeing the world through the eyes of the colonizer is to pivot away, to become unmoored and untethered from colonial logics, episteme, and liberal logics that keep intact the universality of colonial projects.

Postcolonial Asian America: Its Relations to Afro-Asian and Asian-Latino/a Colonial Struggles

“Polyculturalism is a ferocious engagement with the political world of culture, a painful embrace of the skin and all its contradictions.”

Vijay Prashad, *Everybody was Kung Fu Fighting*

Nadia Y. Kim shifts studies of transnational understandings of race away from the more typical American-centered framework of US immigrants.¹³ By focusing instead on the context of US imperialism and its global activities (specifically in Korea), she argues that Korean Americans’ understanding of race precedes their immigration to the US by a long time; their subject formation began in Korea, especially during and in the aftermath of the Korean War. Korean immigrants’ understanding of race, then, was not newly constructed after they set foot in the US. Instead, both America’s and Korea’s racial formations were well underway even prior to immigration or the presence of Koreans in the US. The work of racial identity formation began not only for Koreans’ understanding of themselves and of white Americans, but also for their perception of Latinos and African Americans even before Koreans set foot in the US. Before they entered the cultural landscape of US discrimination against Latinos/as and against African Americans in the context of Jim Crow, they imbibed modes of this discrimination from the relations of military service people in Korea. Analysis of the extent of racial formation and learning of racialized identities in Korea during this time exceed the scope of this essay, but suffice it to note that the lasting consequences of this complex racial formation, prior to immigration, have had major consequences in immigrant communities in the US. This orients Asian American thinkers, including theologians, to a much more complex task: reading events

¹³ Nadia Y. Kim, *Imperial Citizens: Koreans and Race from Seoul to L.A.* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2010).

at multiple sites where a diverse Asia meets a diverse “America.” Two such sites: the Bandung conference in mid-twentieth century Indonesia and the still-debated case of *Plessy v. Ferguson* in late nineteenth century US, can move us toward re-examining our learned reflexes when it comes to complicity in inter-racial, racialized identity formations.

The first case is an Asian-African conference, also known as the Bandung Conference, which was proposed by the Indonesian Government in April 1954. It was held in Bandung, Indonesia, from 18 April to 24 April 1955. Twenty-nine Asian and African countries attended the conference. The spirit of unity of the Asian and African people as demonstrated at the conference—opposition of imperialism and colonialism, the struggle for the defense of national independence and world peace, and the promotion of friendship among the peoples—is known as the “Bandung Spirit.” The conference enhanced the unity and cooperation among the Asian and African countries, inspired the people in the colonies to struggle for national liberation, played a significant role in promoting the anti-imperialist and anti-colonialist struggle of the Asian and African people, and consolidated their unity. In his book, *The Color Curtain*, Richard Wright records his observations of the Bandung Conference. He notes that the document jointly written at the conference was the “last call of westernized Asians to the moral conscience of the west.”¹⁴ The Asian-African Conference was held at a time when post-war movement for national liberation in Asia, Africa, and Latin America was vigorously surging forward, and the forces of imperialism and colonialism were met with heavy blows. It was the first international conference held by Asian and African countries themselves without the participation of any Western colonial power. The Bandung conference was an attempt to forge cross-racial political alliances, analyze the tensions that can make coalitions difficult, and trace the way those alliances are co-opted with monotonous regularity. Later, at the Havana Conference of 1966, the three continents of South America, Asia, and Africa came together in a broad alliance to form the Tricontinental—a movement of coalition building, collaboration, and mutual recognition in working counter to the powers of injustice.¹⁵

¹⁴ Richard Wright, *The Color Curtain* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1956), 202.

¹⁵ Cf. Vijay Prashad, *The Darker Nations: A People's History of the Third World* (New

The second case of complex racial calculus of Asians and “America” returns us to the US context. There is a long history of Afro-Asian writing among US figures, from W. E. B. Du Bois’s engagement with Asian politics to Paul Robeson’s internationalism, in which he attempts to forge cultural links between oppressed peoples across a variety of national, racial, and political contexts. While efforts were made by Asians and Africans to forge alliances, it is also true that Asians and Africans were often pitted against each other in the racial framework of the US. There are numerous cases in recent years that the media has pointed to as racial conflicts between African Americans and Asians, specifically between Korean- and African-Americans. Without going further into these events, I want to highlight an important event as an example of how frequently the white racial logic has made it difficult—if not impossible—for Asians and Africans to forge alliances.

The historical case of *Plessy v. Ferguson* is often recited as familiar history. In 1892, Homer Plessy purchased a first-class train ticket in New Orleans. Plessy was “a citizen of the United States and a resident of the state of Louisiana, of mixed descent, in the proportion of seven-eighths Caucasian and one-eighth African blood.”¹⁶ The reigning one-drop rule legally classified him as “black.” However, according to certain accounts, a “mixture of colored blood was not discernable in him.” After buying his ticket, he sat in a vacant seat in the “whites only” section and then was removed and jailed. In 1896, the Supreme Court ruled against Plessy by holding the constitutionality of the “equal but separate” doctrine. The vote was seven to one. The single dissenting voice was that of Justice John Marshall Harlan. Marshall Harlan argued against the segregation noting, “There is no caste here. Our constitution is color blind, and neither knows nor tolerates classes among citizens. In respect of civil rights, all citizens are equal before the law.”¹⁷ Interestingly there is a little-known part of his opinion. He invokes a third racial category, one that speaks of neither black nor white. He observes that there exists a third group whose difference prohibited

York: The New Press, 2007).

¹⁶ Sanda Mayzaw Lwin, “‘A Race So Different from Our Own’: Segregation, Exclusion, and the Myth of Mobility,” in *AfroAsian Encounters: Culture, History Politics*, eds. Heike Raphael-Hernandez and Shannon Steen (New York: New York University Press, 2006), 19.

¹⁷ Lwin, “‘A Race So Different from Our Own,’” 19.

its members not only from becoming US citizens but also from entering the very borders of the nation. He noted, "there is a race so different from our own that we do not permit those persons belonging to it to become citizens of the US. Persons belonging to it are with few exceptions, absolutely excluded from our country. I allude to the Chinese race."¹⁸ Harlan invoked the Chinese race in his dissent to provide bodily proof that the Louisiana state is unjust to the "citizens of the black race." While his disagreement with the other seven who voted against Plessy is admirable, his logic was still within the white racist framework. By positioning one racial group over another, he manipulates the already-percolating racial divide by redrawing it as one between Asian and African American. The imagined body of the "Chinaman" troubles the order of the color line in a way that is different from the way Plessy's body does. Thus, the Asian body is deployed as a buffer between whites and blacks.¹⁹ In effect, Harlan was arguing against segregating Plessy by invoking the acceptability of segregating the Chinese. In crude form, Harlan was saying "Look, Plessy isn't Chinese, so he shouldn't be subject to the logic of caste."

Given this kind of historical deployment of racial categories within the US in addition to the decolonial movements of anti-colonial and anti-racist spirit of the Bandung gathering, how might Asians in America negotiate their own and others' racial anxieties, and also resist racialized bifurcations? How might Asians in America collaborate with other racialized communities toward decolonization? The accusation flung at many Koreans by other racialized groups is that Koreans are racists. As I have indicated, perhaps this has much to do with learned racism in the context of the US imperial presence in Korea. Rather than "racists," Nadia Kim describes Koreans as "racially prejudiced," in the same way she "would not describe Black Americans who reiterate anti-Korean or anti-Asian stereotypes to be racist but prejudiced."²⁰ Kim's observation stems from her argument that globalization is not just the spread of military and capital but also a flow of images and ideas. One avenue of this is that US media saturation affects not only Koreans in Korea but also Koreans in America as well as other

¹⁸ Lwin, "'A Race So Different from Our Own,'" 20.

¹⁹ The Chinese Exclusion Acts 1882-1943 not only prohibited Chinese immigration but also denied naturalized citizenship to those already here.

²⁰ Kim, *Imperial Citizens*, 9.

Americans. She goes on to argue that US imperialism relies on “one group of color to help subordinate another group of color in a lesser country, thereby creating multiple and complex lines of inequality.”²¹ For those seeking to decolonize and resist racialized bifurcations, it is crucial that we engage in dissensual practices of resistant postcolonialism—one that springs from sites of quotidian practices of the political. It is thus necessary for postcolonial Asian American theology to examine the intricate ways in which we are all implicated in sustaining destructive racial ideologies in service to imperial desires.

Postcoloniality as Interplay of Race, Gender, Sexuality, and Globalization

“It is often said that colonial imperialism is at an end in this world. We would better say that the end is in sight; or rather in the vision of certain men [sic]. It has not yet really ended.”

W. E. B. Du Bois, *Crossing the World Color Line*

It must be stressed that the multiplicity of moves in a contrapuntal method of Asian American theology must attend to the interplay not only between race and empire, or between race and coloniality, but also among these *and* gender, sexuality, and globalization. Again, we find the interaction of a postcolonial complexity with dissensual practice. The contrapuntal fugue that is Asian American theology, then, reaches yet greater complexity and intensity. I will point out some of the dynamics of this interplay as illustrative.

Take first the issue of gendered experience. The construction of genders along a binary division must be criticized and problematized not only because of various ways in which this feeds into other social misogynistic impulses, but also because it is a bondage to the ways that men come to understand their identity. While in the past, sexism was justified based on essentialist and biological notions of what constituted gender, feminist scholars today are arguing for anti-essentialist views and argue that one is not “born a female but becomes one.” I extend this argument further to say then that one is not “born a male but becomes one,” and even further to say that one is not born as a “woman of color” but

²¹ Kim, *Imperial Citizens*, 9.

“becomes one.”²² Rigid gender boundaries have always been transgressed and it is the task of feminist theologians to recover those transgressive occasions. I contend that a sustained and thorough investigation of how gender is also raced must continue to generate a wider conversation between scholars from all different racial/ethnic backgrounds. Gender is simultaneously a practice of racing,²³ and different people experience their gendered bodies differently. For example heteronormativity is often extended to neither women nor men of color. Thus, racialized men of color are often de-masculinized or overtly feminized. A white women’s experience of heteropatriarchy, for example, cannot be universalized but rather should be localized, just as one Asian American woman’s gendered self is understood differently. The same applies for the way that a white Euro-American male’s understanding of “masculinity” is quite different from an Asian male’s experience. While biologists argue that there is no such thing as different races within our human species, the experience of race is a concrete reality. Structural and systemic oppression based on notions of existing racial hierarchy and superiority is concretely present in our history and in our present reality. In the history of settler colonialism in the US, white racism rooted in white supremacy gave birth to the colonization of this land and its peoples in addition to institutionalized slavery; this is attested to in the weight of our nation’s history. In fact, white racism defined who were and who were not even considered to be human. White racism continued throughout US history and even today is at the core of beliefs that build and re-build our national identity.²⁴ White racism and sexism worked simultaneously to marginalize particular peoples in routinized daily practices of humiliation and loss of dignity. Racism and sexism are intermingled and often work to sustain the dominant identity through its anchoring in certain essentialist metanarratives about its own identity in opposition to different identities.

²² Cf., M. Jacqui Alexander and Chandra Talpade Mohanty, *Feminist Genealogies, Colonial Legacies, Democratic Futures* (New York: Routledge, 1996).

²³ For an excellent critique of coloniality, race, gender and sexuality, see, Anne McClintock, *Imperial Leather: Race, Gender and Sexuality in the Colonial Contest* (New York: Routledge, 1995).

²⁴ Cf., Bonnie Honig, *Democracy and the Foreigner* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001).

While the black/white dyad in critical race theory is important and must be sustained, we also need to complexify such conversations even more by examining how white racism deploys race differently against different groups of people so that there is no uniform strategy against all racialized people. Instead, its insidious nature is precisely due to its diverse strategies of deploying racism against different peoples differently.²⁵ Ultimately, it is important to recognize that racism so saturates heteropatriarchy that even white women are not exempt from being racialized. If gender and race are problematic categories that need further and ongoing theorization and theologizing by feminists and womanists, there is also a vital need to re-examine how we construct and understand sexuality.

Gender/race dynamics are bound up with those of sexuality/race. If the ruses of gender and race as clear categories are deployed as scaffolding to shore up and hold together structures of domination, heteronormativity is yet another concept that links all these threads together. Sexuality defined as "straight," or as the "norm," works to sustain patriarchal power over women and other men who transgress rigid sexual demarcations. In a heteronormative dominative structure, those who are deemed as "other" are often seen to be sexually transgressive, degenerative, deviant, and in need of discipline and regulation. Not only are other racialized and gendered people then constructed as non-heterosexual, but those of other religions constructed by heteropatriarchal ideology are also constructed as sexually deviant. We might ask if there are any differences between being a practicing white lesbian Christian and, say, a practicing lesbian Sikh?²⁶ How does race and gender get deployed here? According to the "straight' epistemology" all those who are not heterosexual are deviant and queer. But there is also a lingering and persistent tendency even within queer communities to deploy race and gender against other queers of color, which needs further unpacking. Moreover, we also need to ask the question of how and in what ways those who identify with LGBTIQ communities also sometimes fail to examine their complicity in the global capitalist project. Another complicating dimension is the ever

²⁵ Cf., Gary Y. Okihiro, *Common Ground: Reimagining American History* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001).

²⁶ For an excellent discussion on white supremacy, heteronormativity, racialization of religion and sexuality, see, Jasbir Puar, *Terrorist Assemblages: Homonationalism in Queer Times* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2007).

expanding and deepening work of globalization as yet another way that coloniality has put on a new face.

The forces of globalization lead us to consider still further complexities without leaving the gender/race and sexuality/race dynamics. In an age of rapid globalization, it is not surprising to say that feminist theology must also include finding ways to create just and sustainable existence. Colonization, imperialism, and neoliberalism have left an indelible mark upon many lives and nations. Race, gender, and sexuality have been used and deployed to mark the bodies that have been excluded and even abandoned. Nevertheless, there is an additional dynamic. In the age of globalization, which has and is shifting the way we define global power in our time, we are learning to recognize the emergence of a kind of "financialization"²⁷ of the globe—one in which a division between the masses of the global poor far outnumber those few global elites whose access to wealth is far-reaching. As massive devastation is worked upon vulnerable people and the creation so that a privileged few accumulate wealth and resources beyond their need, we are faced with an unprecedented crisis of hunger, forced migration, disease, and death, and—out of this mix—defiance and violence.

Amid the contrapuntal play of moves, we uncover questions that press toward dissensual practice to envision, again, a decolonized world. How might we theologize in ways that take life—all life—as sacred? How do we theologize so that our world can continue and flourish? What deconstructive and reconstructive theological moves must be made so that we begin to reimagine the divine and this creation as sacred, as living in abundance rather than rooted in competition and scarcity? In the West, we have a saying that "might does not make right." Yet, tragically, this is the base of our impulse for waging war on others. We steal other peoples' resources, exploit their labor, colonize their lands, and create vicious cycles through self-hatred and violence and through injection of drugs, junkified informational technology, and selling knock-off weapons—all in the name of progress and democracy. The caveat here is not simply that the "West" is fast becoming the only practitioner of such modes of being in the world, but also that other

²⁷ Cf., Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, *A Critique of Postcolonial Reason: Toward A History of the Vanishing Present* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1999).

powerful global elites have joined this rank. Feminist theology cannot but give critical attention to the ways that the financialization of the globe is deepening the suffering of masses of people worldwide. Globalization as a new form of neoliberal agenda is yet another re-created face of colonial legacy.

These are some of the queries of a postcolonial dissensual practice, and they set the agenda of an Asian American theology that would address the interplay of race, gender, sexuality, and globalization.

Coda

"To be human is to be intended toward the other."
Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, *Death of a Discipline*

In arguing for a theological decolonial move, I want to insist that even when identity (whether gendered, raced, or sexualized, and whether performed in Asia or in the US or in those complex places of intercontinental meeting) is provisional, one must engage in a persistent auto-critique in order to avoid over-determined authorization of identity and claims to authenticity. For example, the question of "who are the 'authentic inhabitants of margins'?" challenges us to criticize ourselves persistently in order to avoid the ruse of monolithic, homogenous, and totalizing notions of who or what we mean when we use the term "Asian American" or "feminist" queer. Instability of all rigid identitarianism must give way to identity as always positional and provisional in time and space. How, then, do we give narration to our experience/s without reifying certain essentialist stereotypes, or without reifying a particular narrative as the metanarrative? How do we speak about all the plurality, ambiguity, multiplicity, and provincial ways that identity is understood, without allowing one's particular speaking and theorizing to feed into a particular imaginary, be it a white imaginary, that of a particular feminist imaginary, or for that matter, even an Asian American queer feminist imaginary? We must be mindful of just how interdependent our lives are even when we live in worlds apart from one another. We cannot in all honesty speak of the "West" or the "East" precisely because geopolitical histories cannot be so easily sliced and diced. While unique and specific peoples and national formations exist, there are also historical

parallels and global links between different formations due to the ways that those formations are gendered, raced, or colonized.

Postcolonial contrapuntal reading of US history sheds light on how race, imperialism, colonization, gender, sexuality all work to form the ideal of the “heteropatriarchal American” that does not include anyone who transgresses the given, clear boundaries in the dominant white imaginary. How do we begin to theologize the ways in which we must right all the wrongs? Perhaps we must heed the words of people such as Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (an atheist) when she notes that “one needs some sort of ‘licensed lunacy’ from some transcendental Other to develop the sort of ruthless commitment that can undermine the sense that one is better than those who are being helped.”²⁸ To avoid what Spivak decries as “licensed lunacy,” a continuous and sustained effort must be generated to move away from unilateral global feminist theologies and toward the building of coalitions and solidarities across differences—even those that seem insurmountable to some. By doing so, we will generate a worldview that embraces heterogeneity, multiplicity, and differences among and within ourselves and move toward the recognition that all life is worthy of dignity and respect.²⁹ Indeed, we must train our imagination to dare to dream such fantastic possibilities as practices of postcolonial dissensual practice, always and already emphasizing the call for the decolonial in the postcolonial.

In his seminal text, *Asia as Method*, Kuan-Hsing Chen argues that the power behind US imperialism comes from its ability to insert itself into geocolonial space as a figure of modernity. It is copied and reproduced on the local level.³⁰ In order to decolonize, we have to recognize how deeply the US has become embedded in our subjectivities. Imperialism isn't just about might and force, it also exercises power within. It co-opts desires and aligns it with imperial desires. In doing so, often even our dreams become colonized from inside out. Without understanding this, we return to old hierarchical

²⁸ Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, *Other Asias* (MA: Blackwell, 2008), 57.

²⁹ For an excellent theological work that critiques the “logic of One” and offers a theology of multiplicity, see, Laurel Schneider, *Beyond Monotheism: A Theology of Multiplicity* (New York: Routledge, 2008).

³⁰ Kuan-Hsing Chen, *Asia as Method: Toward Deimperialization* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2010), 177.

logics that perpetuate the same logics and desires of empire.³¹ Decolonization then is about provincializing the very founding principles of the west (like the binary). This is not just discovering suppressed voices; it is the work of reaching into unofficial and often forgotten archives of our peoples and also the archives of lost dreams and hopes. This requires moving away from a hegemonic interpretation of history, cultures, and identities, and generating multiple reference points in order to avoid reproducing the logics and desires of empire.³² The task of decolonization, including theological studies, is to deconstruct, decenter, and disarticulate the colonial cultural, political, and even religious imaginary, and instead reconstruct and rearticulate new imaginations toward more democratic futures. By operating simultaneously within different structures, the articulating agent is able to “link different subject positions into an overarching struggle.”³³ This is what allows for us, even Asians in the US, to truly move toward an internationalist anti-colonial freedom movement with others who, though there’s no equivalence, share similar struggles.

³¹ Chen, *Asia as Method*, 165.

³² Chen, *Asia as Method*, 101.

³³ Chen, *Asia as Method*, 99.

*Employing Kwok's Postcolonial Imagination:
On Writing about Chinese American Religious "Nones"*¹

Russell Jeung

"How do you trace where you come from? How do women create a heritage of their own? The project is to accord or restore to women the status of a "historical subject." But how do we track the scent of women who were multiply marginalized, shunted between tradition and modernity, and most illiterate, and who therefore left no trail that could be easily detected?"

Kwok Pui-lan, *Postcolonial Imagination and Feminist Theory*

With over half of Chinese Americans identifying as religious "nones," they are the most "secular" of all American ethnic groups. Yet, if they claimed no religion, then how do we—as scholars of *religion*—interpret Chinese American lives in a meaningful way? As Dr. Kwok queried above, how do we create "a heritage of our own," an ethnic history, sociology, and theology that are not defined and inscribed by others?² How do we track people as legitimate, "historical subjects" and do justice to their highest values, their most devoted practices, and their deeply-held beliefs? How do we make sense of their fragmented situations, especially as they find themselves caught between worlds and "shunted between tradition and modernity?" And how could we, in our own privileged positions within Western academia, recognize how Chinese Americans are "multiply marginalized" and address the intersectional oppressions that they face?

Kwok Pui-lan's four questions about theory and methodology required a paradigmatic shift in how our research team might know and understand the lived, religious and spiritual experiences of

¹ I'd liked to thank Boaz Tang for his editorial assistance, and Seanan Fong and Helen Kim for their co-authorship.

² Kwok Pui-lan, *Postcolonial Imagination and Feminist Theory* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2005), 31.

Chinese Americans as we worked on our book, *Family Sacrifices*.³ The first question about writing our own histories and sociologies involves decolonizing oneself of Western and Orientalist approaches that essentialize being Chinese while establishing new ways of interpretation. The second, that of tracing and tracking the Chinese American experience to accord women the status of “historical subject,” queries how we give voice to women who have left no trail that can easily be detected. Do we only employ historical texts that elite men have left to understand how Confucianism and Chinese Popular Religion have made their imprints on Chinese Americans? The third question, related to the process of cultural hybridity, asks about the process of reconciling competing worldviews, especially in the context of white supremacy and normativity. Chinese Americans have clearly both adopted and resisted mainstream American culture in establishing their own, unique ethnic perspective, but how and why? Finally, the fourth question deals ultimately with liberation, and how to unpack the myriad ways Chinese Americans have faced discrimination and exploitation. By doing so, we hope to offer a different politics, a distinctly Chinese American one, and to promote, as Kwok encouraged, “powerful heuristic models to expose the interlocking oppression of sexism, militarism, colonialism, and sexual violence.”⁴

Fortunately, Professor Kwok’s prescient writing and prophetic voice in her seminal work, *Postcolonial Imagination and Feminist Theology*, offered us a map. In this essay in her honor, I discuss how we sought to apply her postcolonial, feminist methodology to the Chinese American diaspora, even though we were not doing theology, but sociology. Over a decade before we began our writing, her groundbreaking work published in 2005 challenged us to utilize our own postcolonial imaginations to “discern something that is not fitting, to search for new images, and to arrive at new patterns of meaning and interpretation.”⁵ Since Chinese and that of the Chinese diaspora were “often consigned to the periphery,” research on Chinese American religious experiences has been scant. In fact, sociological theories—past ones focusing on assimilation and current ones on secularization or religious nones—failed to explain

³ Russell Jeung, Seanan Fong, and Helen Jin Kim, *Family Sacrifices: The Worldviews and Ethics of Chinese Americans* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2019).

⁴ Kwok, *Postcolonial Imagination*, 36.

⁵ Kwok, *Postcolonial Imagination*, 30.

the transpacific lived traditions which Chinese Americans have carried over and carried on. And so, we needed Kwok's postcolonial imagination and feminist theory to illuminate another path, one that could better account for both the persistence and the changes to the diversity of Chinese American religious experiences.

This chapter outlines how we employed Kwok's three types of imagination—historical, dialogical, and diasporic—to address our animating research questions and to develop two major themes in *Family Sacrifices*. First, familism is the lived tradition valued and practiced by both the first and second generations of Chinese Americans. It is the central narrative by which this group derives ultimate meaning, a sense of belonging, and an ethical system. Rooted in Confucianism and Chinese Popular Religion, Chinese Americans have adapted familism to its American context of empire, racialization, and patriarchy. Second, we offer the heuristic concept of *liyi* (rituals and right relations). As a Chinese notion about cultural difference, it better accounts for and explains the worldviews and ethics of religious nones like Chinese Americans. To begin, we review our book's primary research question and the problems with our initial interview questions.

The Broad Tasks: Developing A Postcolonial Imagination and Writing a Feminist Theory for Chinese Americans

As a sociologist of religion who specializes in Chinese American Studies, I knew that the inordinate percentage of Chinese who affiliated with no religion was an interesting anomaly, at least in Western societies. I asked, "If Chinese Americans have no religion, then what do they believe and how do they deal with issues of religious and spiritual matters? Do they believe in God and an afterlife? How do they deal with the problem of suffering? What's a moral way of relating to others?" Having grown up in a fundamentalist Christian church setting, I developed a particular, colonial, and modern Western paradigm that assumed people had coherent belief systems making up their worldview, which in turn guided their behaviors and relationships. This sociological framework, however, quickly unraveled when I began to trace Chinese Americans' practices that didn't align with Western academic theory. I began interviews asking such questions, but soon found myself getting limited answers regarding beliefs about the ultimate and transcendent. Our respondents were bewildered to be

asked about exclusive truth claims or integrated belief systems. As one interviewee explained why she didn't consider herself a Christian despite assenting to most of its beliefs, "I don't feel like a bona fide Christian would say to me that I was part of their sect because I wouldn't necessarily want to abolish all my other beliefs that I have." She maintained a variety of beliefs, some contradictory and conflicting, that didn't necessarily hold together. Indeed, I realized that questions about religious beliefs didn't pertain to young Chinese Americans who grew up educated in a postmodern environment with religious pluralism and moral relativism. Clearly, the imposition of my Western, Christian framework about religious beliefs did not fit this sample population.⁶ My Western paradigm that assumed people held to clear-cut religious beliefs had to be jettisoned. The task related to Kwok's first question, therefore, was to develop our own way of understanding and writing about our ethnicity that made our experiences more comprehensible and intelligible.

Beyond having to decolonize my own thinking, our research group had to reconsider the sociology of religion's paradigm about religious nones. Rather than focusing on the *absence* of beliefs among Chinese Americans, we needed to examine the *presence* of what they considered most meaningful and how they identified and related to others. The Asian feminist prioritization of practice over theory pointed a way: instead of asking about Chinese Americans' beliefs, we began to probe into their most meaningful rituals and what they meant to them. From these details of their lives, we employed grounded theory to induce how Chinese Americans most highly valued *liyi* practices of familism, that is the rituals (*li*) and right relations (*yi*) centering around family. Along with shifting our point of reference from a Western paradigm to developing a more indigenized Chinese one, we also aimed to bring pertinent theories of Asian American Studies to bear on our research question: (1) transpacific studies, (2) racial capitalism, and (3) intersectionality. These theories relate particularly to the critical issues facing Asian

⁶ Kwok Pui-lan would have foreseen my issues, as she had already recognized the cultural differences between Chinese and Western missionaries: "Asian religious traditions are not driven by belief systems, nor are they shaped primarily by claims to truth and falsity, and as a result, doctrinal purity has never been the concerns of common people, especially women." Kwok, *Postcolonial Imagination*, 161-62.

American communities, including human trafficking, deportation, wholesale displacement of communities, and domestic violence.⁷

First, scholars in Transpacific Studies provide analyses about global power, war and colonial presence, and unequal exchanges between nations that explore the transnational ties of Asian Americans.⁸ With this axis of analysis, we consciously examined dominant discourses about Confucianism and Chinese Popular Religion in China and the US, and how those at the centers of authority utilized colonizing ideologies to maintain state power in China and white supremacy in the US. Second, researchers of racial capitalism attend to how racialization and economic structures mutually reinforce each other. Thus, our research team looked closely at the relationship between class and race in stigmatizing Chinese Popular Religion, especially in the American context.⁹ Third, feminists have furthered research on intersectionality, which is what Dr. Kwok precisely called for in her championing of postcolonial feminist thinking. With this directive, we attended to the ways in which women and queer people in our study took different positions and standpoints from heterosexual cisgender men, and consciously highlighted the divergent ways sexuality and gender reinforced class differences in Chinese American familism.

⁷ Again, Dr. Kwok foresaw what theories needed to be developed and refined to address questions arising from the conditions facing Asian Americans; these theories needed to “capture the fluidity and contingent character of Asian cultures, which are undergoing rapid and multidimensional changes.” She further argued that “the exploration of the interstices of different forms of oppression under the shadow of the empire constitutes the exciting postcolonial feminist project.” Kwok, *Postcolonial Imagination*, 43; 81.

⁸ “Postcolonial theories add a critical dimension by focusing on empire and colonization, the center and the periphery, the exiled and the diasporized,” thus opening up new questions about the historical contexts of a group. Kwok, *Postcolonial Imagination*, 79. Employing the genealogical approach of Transpacific Studies towards the discourse of human rights, Juliette Hua presents “the mutually constitutive ways race, gender, sexuality, and nation work to organize regimes of knowledge that then explain and naturalize uneven relationships of power.” Juliette Hua, *Trafficking Women’s Human Rights* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2011), xvi. See also Viet Thanh Nguyen and Janet Hoskins, *Transpacific Studies: Framing an Emerging Field* (Honolulu: University of Hawai’i Press, 2014).

⁹ Similarly, Kwok suggested that “the impact of global capitalism on cultural formations has not been clearly articulated” and recommended its interrogation. Kwok, *Postcolonial Imagination*, 41.

Having been granted from *Postcolonial Imaginations* our primary tasks of decolonization and of developing a viable, communal heuristic for Chinese Americans, we next had to utilize specific feminist methodologies to detail their rich subjectivities. The first was a historical imagination, which enabled us to trace the sources of Chinese American non-religiousness, as well as their familism.

Historical Imagination

In seeking the origins of Chinese American familism, we had little record of how Confucianism and Chinese Popular Religion were practiced in China by the masses through the centuries. We therefore had to rely on texts from Confucian scholars to discern discursive approaches to how Han Chinese saw themselves in relation to gods, spirits, ancestors, and barbarians. Dr. Kwok spelled out our difficulty, and that of others, in writing historical accounts of the colonized: "What are the steps we need to take and what kind of mindset will steer us away from Eurocentrism, on one hand, and a nostalgic romanticizing of one's heritage, on the other?"¹⁰ With the former perspective, we ran the risk of essentializing and Othering the religious lives of Chinese by using Western categories; these discourses failed to recognize the difference and diversity among Chinese in their sociohistoric context. The latter trap, which I was more likely to fall into, was to valorize Chinese ideals without dealing with the patriarchy, family dysfunctions, and legitimation of oppressive systems through religion. To avoid both issues, we utilized Kwok's historical imagination that underscored religious change instead of fixed traits of Chinese.¹¹

We aimed to generate theoretical frameworks that could better capture Chinese Americans' lived experiences. In our unpacking of the ancestral roots of Chinese American familism, we detailed three primary sources of this worldview: Chinese Popular Religion, Confucianism, and the *liyi* Chinese identity, in our book:

By detailing these three transpacific, historic sources of Chinese nonreligiousness and familism, and their use across sociopolitical contexts, we reveal how they are

¹⁰ Kwok, *Postcolonial Imagination*, 30.

¹¹ We heeded Kwok's advice to pursue "cracks, fissures, and openings which refused . . . to follow the set pattern." Kwok, *Postcolonial Imagination*, 30.

historically rooted and culturally specific. Moreover, by utilizing *liyi* as a theoretical framework, we identify key aspects of Confucianism and Chinese Popular Religion that have changed in the past century and how they shape immigrant Chinese Americans so that they identify as nonreligious.¹²

Historicized accounts of a religion reveal fractures and transformations of it, and thus avoid the essentialization that Eurocentric depictions are prone to do. As an example, shifts in how Chinese Popular Religion was practiced in China and then in the US highlight the role of colonial state modernization, race, and gender.

We described Chinese Popular Religion as a recognizable tradition practiced by a range of people, from officials to artisans and farmers, that included (1) ritualized relationships with gods, spirits and ancestors; (2) the acceptance of the spiritual efficacy of religious practices; and (3) assumptions about the role of otherworldly forces, such as karma and *qi*. Unlike practices of organized sects such as Buddhism, Chinese vernacular practices were diffuse and transmitted by institutions such as the family, village, and state. We concluded, “Notably, this repertoire assumes that an individual can hold to a plurality of beliefs and practices that are not exclusive or affiliated with any one religion.”¹³ We then emphasized how both colonization and state modernization have changed and impacted Asian cultures, such as the practice of Chinese Popular Religion. For instance, following the overthrow of the Ming Dynasty in 1911, Chinese Popular Religion declined as the new government adopted Western categories of religion that named popular religious activities as “superstitious.” We observed that, “During the Republic era, over half a million Chinese temples were removed under the slogan, ‘Destroy temples to build schools.’”¹⁴ A half-century later during China’s Cultural Revolution, the state eradicated religion in every public sphere so that folk practices became private and clandestine, home-based activities. Since 1979, however, Chinese Popular Religion has seen a revival in China after it has been officially re-categorized from “feudal superstition” to “folk beliefs.” Fenggang Yang and Anning Hu find that now more than half of Chinese individuals (52%) engage in practices of individual folk

¹²Jeung, Fong, and Kim, *Family Sacrifices*, 28.

¹³ Jeung, Fong, and Kim, *Family Sacrifices*, 29.

¹⁴ Jeung, Fong, and Kim, *Family Sacrifices*.

religion.¹⁵ These shifts illustrate how varied state policies over time in China reinforced the rule of authorities and altered the terrain on which Chinese Popular Religion operated.

The practices of Chinese Popular Religion continued to face changes through the process of migration and introduction into America's religious marketplace. The Chinese American community undergoes a selective immigration process since professional, middle class, and nuclear families have priority over others due to US policies. Consequently, the absence of Chinese grandparents and extended family members decreases the likelihood that nuclear families maintain practices of Chinese Popular Religion. Furthermore, with fewer Chinese temples in the American religious landscape, Chinese Americans lack access to physical sites to do rituals for gods and spirits. Instead, Christian privilege in the US and the active evangelism of churches encourage the adoption of Christian beliefs and practices. Because mainstream Americans view the practices of Chinese Popular Religion as superstitious and weird, the second generation of Chinese Americans avoided its racialized stigma. One respondent exclaimed how no one else in his neighborhood followed the same taboos as his Chinese family: "I didn't notice this [taboo practice] from other people. It was personal, at the dinner table. It seems unusual; I didn't see anyone else doing it."¹⁶ As such rituals regarding luck are personal and family practices made him feel distant from his neighborhood friends, he later rejected these ethnic customs.

To summarize, we uncovered how Western colonization with its definitions of "true" religion, and the Chinese state with its modernizing ideologies, each suppressed Chinese Popular Religion as superstition. Furthermore, migration to another continent altered the family and religious context in which Chinese Popular Religion was practiced. With fewer religious institutions and extended families that might maintain it, Chinese Popular Religion as practiced in the US has attenuated over time and subsequently has had to adapt to its new context. The adaptation can be captured by the differences held by the first and second generations of Chinese

¹⁵ Fenggang Yang and Anning Hu, "Mapping Chinese Folk Religion in Mainland China and Taiwan," *Journal of the Scientific Study of Religion* 51, no. 3 (2012): 516.

¹⁶ Jeung, Fong, and Kim, *Family Sacrifices*, 81.

Americans as they negotiate maintaining traditions and adapting to the new cultural context of the U.S.

Dialogic Imagination

The third question fueling our research attempted to connect and reconcile separate histories and cultures, such as Chinese and American cultures in the case of Chinese Americans. Yet this task presents two issues. First, this wholeness and unification of identity may not be necessarily possible, especially if the two cultures have competing values or beliefs. Second, cultural interaction in the contact zone is a complicated process of hybridization where the asymmetry of power between two cultures is “full of tensions, fractures, and resistance.”¹⁷ The transmission and translation of Chinese Popular Religion in the US towards Chinese American familism exemplify this ongoing, conversational process of hybridization.¹⁸ It demonstrates that Asian culture is neither traditional nor static, and that the Chinese American community is in a continuing movement of negotiation, resistance, and re-appropriation of its traditions. For example, the 2012 National Asian American Survey on the religious beliefs held by the first and second generations yielded surprising and mixed findings. The first generation is more likely to believe in *qi*, a spiritual energy force pervading the universe (46.7% of the first generation believe versus 29.3% of the second). However, over half the second generation (54.2%)—about the same percentage that claim to be religious nones—believe in ancestral spirits while only 42.9% of the first generation do. While beliefs vary, practices of Chinese Popular Religion are maintained at the same rates between generations. The immigrant generation (11.9%) and their children (9.7%) maintain home shrines at roughly the same number. Similarly, both generations celebrate Lunar New Year at high rates (87.3% versus 82.3%). Why did this group engage in the same religious practices if they held different beliefs? As historic subjects, Chinese Americans

¹⁷ Jeung, Fong, and Kim, *Family Sacrifices*, 43.

¹⁸ Dr. Kwok encouraged a dialogical imagination, which is “the process of creative hermeneutics . . . to bridge time and space, to create new horizons, and to connect the disparate elements of our lives into a meaningful whole;” because “a postcolonial subject . . . has to negotiate different cultural worlds constantly;” she wondered how two worlds or horizons could be “fruitfully brought together.” Kwok, *Postcolonial Imagination*, 38; 39.

continued their ethnic traditions, but imbued them with their own range of understandings and sensibilities. As they engaged in similar activities of Lunar New Year celebrations or ancestor veneration, these rituals varied in *meaning* for different Chinese American individuals. For some, offerings to ancestors aimed to feed and care for the soul of the deceased, who was assumed to continue to exist in the world. For others, those using elite interpretations with Confucian influences linked ancestor veneration to moral cultivation, as a ritual that promoted filial piety. Still yet another portion of our respondents reported that they continued to do ancestor veneration as an ethnic custom, as a means to rehearse their Chinese identity. These different meanings of ancestral rituals for Chinese Americans exemplify, as Dr. Kwok writes, the “multiple experiences, diverse interests, and social locations” of this grouping.¹⁹

Along with the racialization of Chinese practices as weird and Othered, two other dialogic factors impacted how Chinese Popular Religion was transmitted. First, immigrant parents rarely explained to their children the meanings, histories, and actual mechanisms of the rituals of Chinese Popular Religion. Most generally instructed their children simply to copy behaviors of veneration or to obey rules of luck, fengshui, and numerology. For instance, when a respondent explicitly asked for reasons to conduct family ancestor rituals, she did not receive a clear answer, but an abrupt one:

I think we asked before why [we celebrate a death anniversary], and [my mother] just says, “That’s what you do!” Honoring the ancestors, she didn’t really explain.²⁰

As a result, “very few of our respondents continued these traditions as elaborately, frequently, or devoutly as their parents.” Another informant explained that her family engaged in formal Chinese New Year customs primarily to participate in the ritual and not to affirm a belief. She summarized the performative nature of Chinese Popular Religion:

That’s the thing. They never explained why we do the things we do. We never talked about why. You do it to do it. You’re supposed to do it.²¹

¹⁹ Kwok, *Postcolonial Imagination*, 35.

²⁰ Jeung, Fong, and Kim, *Family Sacrifices*, 76.

²¹ Jeung, Fong, and Kim, *Family Sacrifices*, 77.

Rather than teaching a set of doctrines or beliefs, her parents socialized her to conduct a set of rituals to honor her deceased family members. The modeling of religious practices, instead of the formalized teaching of sacred texts and explanation of rituals, demonstrates the contrasts between Asian and Western religious cultures. Raised with Western perspectives that upheld Christian privilege, the Chinese American second generation assumed that a religion consisted of (1) a strong belief in a deity, (2) relationship with exclusive commitment to this deity, (3) voluntary association with other believers, and (4) moral behavior consistent with these beliefs. Because their practices of Chinese Popular Religion had no official name and did not constitute these normative expectations for a religious affiliation, they would state that they had no religion. In this case, the asymmetry of power held by Christian institutions and that yielded by adherents of Chinese Popular Religion resulted in the uneven transmission of the latter. In fact, changes in how religious practices were to be inculcated and adopted reflect the difficulty in religious dialogue across time and spaces. The first generation expected the second to mimic their rituals, but the second generation wanted explanations for these religious activities, in the same ways that they might receive Christian Sunday School lessons or Religious Studies course lectures.

Second, dissonant acculturation inhibited the transmission of Chinese Popular Religion; as the second generation adapted more quickly to the US than their parents did, they became at odds with their parents. This process affected how well the parents could employ religious terminology and how well the children could engage fully in rituals. Due to language barriers, Chinese-speaking parents could not communicate well the complex worldviews and deep meanings of their spiritual traditions to their offspring. In turn, their children could rarely understand the terminology of Chinese Popular Religion if they were to ask. For instance, one Chinese American family had statues of several Chinese deities throughout their house, but the children could not even name these gods. Besides having limited vocabularies, the second generation barely could read and write Chinese, so they could not fully engage at Chinese temples which included the reading of chants. As one respondent complained,

My grandfather likes to take us to the temple near his house. And we go in there, and I'll light some incense and maybe do some of the things in there. I don't know really what it means because I can't read [the chants]. I'm just going with them and doing things like that.²²

Her participation, therefore, was haphazard at best. Without being fully bilingual in Chinese and English, the second generation is at a severe disadvantage in their ability to preserve their ethnic traditions and religious heritage. The loss of Chinese and the use of the colonizer's language of English structure what they assume about spiritual matters and how much they can fully rehearse and re-appropriate from their ethnic background. Nevertheless, as the data reveals, Chinese Americans continue to engage in some traditions to reconcile these ethnoreligious practices with their American situation, and to impose their own meanings and values on them. Class and gender issues in the US presented specific conflicts that Chinese Americans had to resolve if they were to practice familism. To illustrate how they dealt with these issues and conflicts, we employed Kwok's diasporic imagination, to which we turn next.

Diasporic Imagination

The final question related to documenting Chinese American religious nones dealt with how they dreamt for a better future given the structural constraints in which they found themselves.²³ As outsiders from within, diasporic subjects in new host countries are well positioned to unravel dominant discourses of tradition and modernity, colonial authority, and powers of representation. Diasporic subjects ourselves, our research group purposely examined the interplay of Asian American privilege and minoritization, especially the colonization of the second generation towards hyper-individualistic, market-based values. At the same time, they tempered capitalistic impulses with collective values stemming from their family loyalties. They then constructed and re-imagined new notions of home and community, of belonging and identity.

²² Jeung, Fong, and Kim, *Family Sacrifices*, 80.

²³ Dr. Kwok conjures a diasporic imagination as one that "negotiates an ambivalent past, while holding on to fragments of memories, cultures, and histories in order to dream of a different future." Kwok, *Postcolonial Imagination*, 46.

Class factors certainly shaped how Chinese Americans viewed their practices of Chinese Popular Religion. Overall, those who had less education were more likely to assume the presence of *qi* and ancestral spirits in this world. About 65% of those with high school education believed in *qi*, while only 35% of those with post-BA educational attainment did. Similarly, over half of those with only high school degrees believed in ancestral spirits, in contrast to the 39% of those with post-BAs who did. Indeed, those with post-BAs were three times less likely to maintain a home shrine than their less educated co-ethnics. In line with this class difference, working class parents of our interviewees adhered to the rituals of Chinese Popular Religion much more regularly, elaborately, and devotedly than the parents who were professionals. We summarized,

The regular rituals that they conducted aimed to be efficacious in communicating with and appeasing spiritual beings. While immigrant parents worked hard for what they earned, they also recognized that their lives were governed by supernatural forces, such as fate, luck, and *qi*. They therefore went to great lengths to enhance their luck and to balance life energy.²⁴

In contrast, Chinese American families with parents in professional occupations viewed these rituals more as ethnic customs than religious ones. As stated, selective immigration prioritized Chinese American professionals for entry, especially those from STEM backgrounds who held more empiricist, rational, and religiously skeptical attitudes. Consequently, onerous aspects of Chinese Popular Religion were easily discarded and what was maintained were rituals that reinforced values of family—such as remembering deceased family members, respecting elders, honoring parents, and gifting children—which meshed better with their scientific views. For example, one respondent’s mom, who was a chemist, eschewed Christianity because of her rationalistic mindset but kept Chinese family rituals. Her daughter noted, “I don’t think my mom believes in the Christian God. She has questions about whether God really exists because she is a scientist.”²⁵ Professional parents socialized their second generation Chinese American children differently than the working class ones. Subsequently, their

²⁴ Jeung, Fong, and Kim, *Family Sacrifices*, 59.

²⁵ Jeung, Fong, and Kim, *Family Sacrifices*, 62.

offspring were more likely to be atheist, while the working class respondents were more apt to be spiritual but not religious. Among the atheists in our sample, 85% had parents who instilled the same rationality, scientific mindset, and pragmatic approach to life. In contrast, those who were spiritual but not religious had parents who were devout followers of Chinese Popular Religion, Buddhism, or Christianity. For instance, an interviewee explained how her mother burned incense every morning and prayed at two home altars, prepared elaborate meals during Chinese festivals for offerings, and arranged their home according to fengshui principles. Raised in this spiritual environment, her daughter readily acknowledged the presence of spiritual beings, and both attended Christian church and consulted palm readers. To conclude, educational and class differences shaped how Chinese Americans practiced Chinese Popular Religion, and how they were socialized made it either plausible to be spiritual but not religious, or implausible to be religious at all.

Not only do class factors structure religious socialization, but capitalism even shapes how Asian Americans perform their ethnicity and culture. We found that racialized multiculturalism and “marketed, consumable ethnicity” structure what traditions are maintained. To illustrate, Chinese Americans continue celebrating Chinese holidays, such as Chinese New Year and the Mid-Autumn Festival, but they tend to reduce these festivals to what is enjoyable and fun. One interviewee listed what aspects of Chinese New Year she retains for her own children:

We'll keep customs - anything that's fun. I want them to have fun and to see family. I don't want them to be crazy superstitious. I think having little rituals makes holidays fun, so that's what customs are for. And they're very customary and traditional. Your mom did it, your grandmother did it, it's nice to do. It's not for thinking bad luck or dragons eating you. It's just about fun and your family's wisdom.²⁶

With a similar orientation, another second generation mother wants to preserve special foods during festivals in order to teach her children what little she knows of their shared ethnic heritage:

²⁶ Jeung, Fong, and Kim, *Family Sacrifices*, 151.

I think even the holiday stuff, the mooncakes and sticky rice, I would like to do that for my kids, so they don't lose touch. I've already got out of touch with what the meaning is behind those, really, so I'd like them to have some of it.²⁷

Here, the continued celebration of Chinese holidays through food and fun highlights the Americanized outlook that Chinese in the US have adopted. We observe, "Like other Americans, they have come to value – on a ritualized basis – what they can consume, what they can enjoy, and what they can use as symbolic or ethnic pride."²⁸ In the diaspora, key aspects of Chinese Popular Religion become lost as the colonizing discourses of American capitalism reduce Asian culture to food and fun. Nonetheless, its values continue to be re-imagined, especially by women as culture-bearers and culture-makers, through their new rituals of meaning.

Conclusion: A Postcolonial, Feminist Imagining of Chinese American Familism

To explain the worldviews and ethics of Chinese Americans, we benefitted from the post-colonial, feminist imaginations proposed by Dr. Kwok. As she recommended, we attended to historic shifts in Chinese Popular Religion to identify how empires, nation-states, and Western discourses have categorized and represented it. It is thus structured as a home-based practice, one that is not even acknowledged in American religious surveys. We examined the dialogic process between the immigrant first generation and their second generation children, and what gets lost in the transmission and translation of Chinese Popular Religion. Because of language barriers and dissonant acculturation, only fragments of the history and meanings of religious traditions get passed. And in the diaspora, racialization and capitalism further alter the practices of Chinese Popular Religion. What is superstitious and weird get discarded, while what is fun and tasty continue to be consumed. Yet, even as Chinese Popular Religion may become lost in translation, its values are carried on, especially by Chinese American women who both continue old traditions with new meanings and establish new rituals that reinforce familism. They conduct these regular practices (*li*) in order to express, maintain, and

²⁷ Jeung, Fong, and Kim, *Family Sacrifices*, 152.

²⁸ Jeung, Fong, and Kim, *Family Sacrifices*, 153.

socialize their children in what they consider most important and righteous, their family relations (*yi*). To conclude, I highlight two Chinese American women whose rituals and practices represent their familism.

On the surface, Jane does not seem like a proponent of Chinese American familism. Her family was so dysfunctional that her parents didn't attend her brother's wedding and she claimed, "My mother and I were never close because she was constantly yelling and scolding me." Due to her strained relationship with her parents, she said she "has no desire to have a family or get married."²⁹ In spite of these patterns, Jane makes utmost priority for her extended family reunions, a lifelong ritual for her. Requiring the coordination of six families with eleven cousins participating, she specified reasons why she continues this annual tradition: the shame of not attending, the tradition, and the fun. She explained,

If you don't go, you get a lot of shit from the family for the rest of the year. Since we've been going since we were young, it's a tradition, but it's fun and something we and the cousins like to do.

Two activities at the reunion are important to Jane. She succinctly described one of them: "Eat. That's all we do. We just eat. Chinese pastries for breakfast, dim sum for lunch, and a giant banquet for dinner." The second is to spend time with her grandfather and to visit her grandmother's gravesite. Jane does not like her parents and doesn't want her own family, but she continues to adhere to a Chinese American familism that is remarkable in the extent to which family members feel responsible for each other. She declared she would take care of her brother "even if he was a drunk," and she would probably similarly financially support her cousins. The annual family reunion taught her these mutual obligations, as her grandfather would pay for everyone's vacation. She summarizes why her family, ultimately, remains important: "I guess it's who you would think would support you at the end of the day."

Similarly, Cary had an estranged relationship with her father and did not see him for six years. Ironically, she felt she was "crap at filiality" and poor at communicating with her parents, even though she was a communications consultant. Nevertheless, she fondly

²⁹ Jeung, Fong, and Kim, *Family Sacrifices*, 140.

reminisced about when her father took her out to a new, Taiwanese restaurant. Food became the vehicle by which they reconnected:

Bonding over food works perfectly. We're both food snobs. So I can nerd out over molecular gastronomy and he can tell me stories about Taiwan and what food was like. We let food be the thing to share. Chinese have a hard time talking about love in general. So we let bonding over food do it for us.³⁰

Cary choked up when she considered her relationship with her father and her desire to improve on her "crappy filiality." She wanted to come out about her transgender identity to him, but wanted to learn the correct terminology in Chinese so she could explain it better. In the meantime, food became the vehicle by which she expressed filial devotion and love. In several ways, Cary is an outlier to Chinese American familism. She doesn't plan to get married due to her sexuality nor have children due to her environmentalist concerns. As a progressive, queer transgender person, she sees herself as an activist for the recognition of intersectionality and an inclusive approach toward sustainability. Yet even with her different outlook, Cary itemized her failures to live up to her own values of familism: "I should be talking to my parents more. I should be consulting them more on personal life decisions. I should tell my dad I'm trans." And when she addressed her own future, she discussed them in terms of family: "I really don't know what family looks like in the future. I'm going to put my wealth in securing my friends' children. That's where I'm putting my energies," she stated.³¹ In her collective sensibility, in her concern over poor filiality, and in her future orientation to secure opportunities for children, she is a model of Chinese American familism.

As an epistemology, Dr. Kwok's postcolonial feminist imagination is a wondrous way to know, see, and write about our lives. We are proud to be a small example of her intellectual legacy, one that challenges multiple oppressions and offers creative approaches to resist and reinvent our communities. In documenting

³⁰ Jeung, Fong, and Kim, *Family Sacrifices*, 117.

³¹ Jeung, Fong, and Kim, *Family Sacrifices*, 126.

the transformation of Chinese Popular Religion toward the lived practices of Chinese American familism, we are indebted to Dr. Kwok's scholarship. Her advocacy and leadership have even more so pointed us to paths of liberation and hope.

Kwok Pui-lan's Theo-Creativity in Practical Theology and Religious Education

Christine J. Hong

Introduction

When I first came across Kwok Pui-lan's scholarship, I was a doctoral student in the Practical Theology program at Claremont School of Theology. I picked up *Postcolonial Imagination and Feminist Theology*, a well-known classic for those interested in the intersection of feminist theologies and postcolonial studies. Kwok's work in postcolonial feminist theologies is unapologetically grounded in an Asian feminist perspective. She makes herself radically visible rather than adhere to the constructs of normative white feminist perspectives. This introduction to her work helped me see how Kwok effectively dialogues with partners across different traditions, generations, racializations, and histories. While she stands firm in her positionality as an Asian feminist postcolonial theologian, her work is constantly engaged with people of difference and is interdisciplinary at its core. Kwok's theological tenor never minimizes her distinctly Asian feminist and postcolonial values as part of dialogue, and instead engages colleagues' work with an ease and ferocity that pushes back as if to say, "I am here. *We* are here." Her scholarly commitment to take up space is distinctly communally bound. It is because of her grounding in communal accountability that her theology has always fascinated and encouraged me to learn my own Asian feminist theological voice.

Through my initiation into Kwok's scholarship, I learned my voice as an Asian American feminist practical theologian. I learned that I did not need to internalize or mimic the white colonial academy. It was through Kwok's theological framework that I understood how my deep yearnings and questions about the work of practical theology did not ultimately exist for the white supremacist scrutiny and gaze. It was okay to be me and for my

commitments to be anchored in my communities of belonging, both within the Asian and Asian North American context and beyond, via racialized and interreligious solidarities. Kwok's scholarship and her mentorship, as part of the larger Pacific, Asian, and North American Asian Women in Theology and Ministry (PANAAWTM)¹ gathering of Asian and Asian North American women, teaches me time and time again that I can push away the white gaze because I am not accountable to it. I am instead, accountable to the wider community of Asian and Asian North American postcolonial feminists, theologians, and educators.

I met Kwok Pui-lan for the first time at the Asian Theological Summer Institute,² during my third year of doctoral studies. Each student participating in the program presented their dissertation proposal and research. I presented my proposal and research on the spiritual formation of Korean American girls in the Korean immigrant church. I worked hard on my methodology, incorporating all the "classic" – that is, white – practical theological voices in the field. I integrated what I believed to be an inclusive feminist lens throughout my proposed research and felt the project and the dissertation work were in good shape and ready to go.

I was particularly eager to hear Kwok Pui-lan's impression and critique of my work. I made an appointment to meet with her one on one. I was nervous but excited to sit with one of my theological heroes. What an opportunity! After reading my stack of papers, she looked up at me and in her firm but kind way posed a series of questions that forever changed how I thought about my scholarly contribution to the field of practical theology and religious education. She asked, "You are studying the lives of Korean American girls, but where are the voices of Korean American and Asian American scholars? Where are the voices of the Asian American theologians who paved the way for your work? Why are you giving so much time and credit to the work of white scholars who do not understand what it means to be an Asian American girl, or a Korean American girl for that matter?"

I sat there stunned into silence, unable to respond. Kwok Pui-lan gave me a gift that day; she introduced me to the work of other

¹ PANAAWTM website, <https://www.panaawtm.org/>.

² "Asian Theological Summer Institute," *United Lutheran Seminary*, <https://www.unitedlutheranseminary.edu/academics/institutes/asian-theological-summer-institute>.

Asian and Asian North American religious educators and practical theologians. It is not a given that Asian and Asian North American scholars will read the scholarship or hear the voices of those who mirror their experiences in their respective guilds and fields. The racialized silos of the academy and the normativity of whiteness still permeate doctoral education. I went back home to Claremont, CA and upended my entire dissertation. I redesigned the research methodology. I recrafted a new bibliography and exorcised the voices of people outside of my community. I focused on centering the voices of Asian and Asian North American women and girls. My work as a religious educator, a teacher, and a writer shifted in that moment, from that one conversation.

Since then, Kwok's questions are in my mind's eye no matter what I am doing. Most importantly, because of Kwok Pui-lan, no matter what I do, I try and remember my communities of accountability. I study, teach, and write for them and because of them. I learned from her that my scholarship best contends with whiteness and decoloniality when the vibrancy of our Asian and Asian North American lives is visible and loud. Our colorful lives should be important to one another and to white scholars, not because of assimilation or mimicry, but because we *are who we are*. We are worthy because we exist.

This moment of transformation for my scholarship was a long time in coming. Before that, I hungered for wider Asian and Asian North American women's representation in practical theology. Through Kwok's influence, I learned about the pillars of Asian and Asian North American practical theology and religious education: the lives and scholarship of Boyung Lee, Courtney Goto, Mai-Anh Le Tran, HyeRan Kim-Cragg, and Su Yon Pak. The communally grounded, radical scholarship of these feminist scholars are important for the dominant culture to contend with and comprehend. How might practical theology, which created a sliver of space for Asian and Asian North American feminist scholars, make a more expansive space for us within itself, not as cultivators of periphery narratives but as part of the lifeblood of its work? How might the scholarship of Kwok Pui-lan continue to inform Asian and Asian North American religious educators on how to ground our communal commitments and accountabilities in one another's lives and shared commitments?

In light of these questions, I believe that Kwok Pui-lan's scholarship and the praxis of her presence and mentorship pull together Asian and Asian North American women in theology across our varied and established disciplines. Her scholarship and impact remind us of the necessity and significance of co-working towards mutual flourishing. Our work is not siloed and in competition with one another—something that white supremacy and the white gaze of academe desires to constantly reproduce among scholars—but significant to and for one another's academic and communal lifeblood and futures. There is boundarylessness in Kwok's work that invites all Asian and Asian North American women to live into theo-creativity and flexibility. In other words, embodying its fullness, the crux of her postcolonial imagination. Kwok Pui-lan's theological work and mentoring commitment continually remind Asian and Asian North American women of our familial bonds across generations, geography, and religious commitments. She initiates us into a sisterhood that is at its heart justice-oriented, and both backward looking and forward facing at all times.

Dialogical Imagination as Theo-Creativity in Practical Theology

As a systematic theologian, Kwok has long noted the inherent problem of practical theology and its commensurate turn towards postcolonial studies as a way to mitigate the colonial foundations and violent impact of research and Christian ministerial practice. She writes, "The growing interest in postcolonial studies in practical theology and the practice of ministry reflects a collective consciousness of the limitations of colonial Christianity and its models of ministry to address the needs of our world."³ Kwok wonders about the "colonial trappings of the church . . . rooted in European cultures, and hierarchal and clerical church cultures,"⁴ and the ability of the Church, out of these empire-laden commitments, to answer the call to participate in the shaping of justice for the poor and marginalized. For Kwok, Asian and Asian North American feminist theologies possess the potential to live into the call of embodied theo-creativity. Theo-creativity that encounters

³ Kwok Pui-lan, "Epilogue," in *Postcolonial Practice of Ministry: Leadership, Liturgy, and Interfaith Engagement*, eds. Kwok Pui-lan and Stephen Burns (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2016), 215.

⁴ Kwok, "Epilogue," 216.

and struggles to make meaning and grounds itself in the experiences of those it meets, especially those at the edges of society. In particular, Asian and Asian North American feminist practical theology is grounded in the lived experiences of people and their communities of religious and spiritual belonging. Our lived experiences are not neatly categorized and bordered, but instead traverse the transnational, inter-spiritual, and interreligious messy and beautiful quality of life in community.

Kwok's interdisciplinary work as a theologian emphasizes postcolonialism's ability to deconstruct "binary constructions of the world, challenges essentialism, and confronts political and religious ideologies that legitimate the status quo."⁵ Part of this deconstruction seeks to complicate how dominant cultures and people understand and reify categorizations and markers of nationality, ethnicity, racialization, genders, and other human distinctions. The impetus of empire has always been to catalog and categorize the world, fixing the human experience within a perpetual loop of compare and contrast, with white, Euro-American ways of life and experiences as normative.

Postcolonial feminism desires to do away with the violence of the compare and contrast model of understanding across cultures, religions, and other forms of human difference. Instead, Asian and Asian North American postcolonial feminism contends with and embraces the contradictions of what it means to be human, particularly among the most vulnerable among us.⁶ For instance, Asian and Asian North American communities might embrace a Christianity that is deeply problematic and colonial, while also holding onto the distinctly ethnic and cultural traits and values of motherlands. Embracing the new does not always require the melting away or disappearing of what is old. The two are in constant dialogue and disagreement, but find a way to coexist and be embodied. This intentional disordering and privileging of the disarray of human religio-cultural experience and practice reclaims and redistributes power. Facing disorder, chaos, and internal conflict upsets empire and the binary laden colonial values of this or that embedded in many of our theological disciplines.

⁵ Kwok, "Epilogue," 216.

⁶ Kwok, "Epilogue," 217.

Along with Kwok, over the years, practical theology at large has also moved beyond the study of primarily centering the Christian lived experience, and in particular, the incessant mapping over of colonial Christian meanings onto global communities. Practical theology has begun to examine and take seriously the cultures, religions, faith practices, and lives of multiple belongers, and different religious and faith communities. Much of this is due to its embracing of practical theologians who are also postcolonial in their commitments. Many scholars, who identify as Black, Indigenous, Latinx, Asian, Native Hawaiian and Pacific Islander, do the work of anti-colonialism with their very bodies which are often marked as “other” in predominantly white spaces of the academy and guilds. Through their presence and work within practical theology, the understandings of boundaries have shifted to incorporate a postcolonial commitment to moving beyond the erasures predicated and caused by empire and into a movement of reclamation of things put away, taken away, and ripped asunder for the sake of the colonial project.

Asian American feminism, as part of a commitment and accountability within the realm of practical theology, incorporates the groundbreaking work of Kwok Pui-lan and other Asian and Asian North American feminist theologians who wrestle with worlds between worlds and positionalities constructed within several binary laden understandings of the human experience, including gender, racialization, Christian and other, America exceptionalism and the “foreign.” Kwok’s postcolonial imagination challenges practical theologians to consider not only existing or articulated individual and communal experiences of Asian American women, but also experiences and memories that have been lost, the moments and futures that are beyond our grasp because of imperially constructed boundaries between homeland and diaspora, us and them. Kwok helps us understand the idea of pulling together what has been separated and lost through the term dialogical imagination. Kwok writes,

The term dialogical imagination describes the process of creative hermeneutics in Asia. It attempts to convey the complexities, the multidimensional linkages, and the different levels of meaning...it involves ongoing conversation among different religious and cultural traditions...dialogical imagination attempts to bridge the

gaps of time and space, to create new horizons, and to connect the disparate elements of our lives into a meaningful whole.⁷

According to Kwok, dialogical imagination is creative in its impulse and nature. It thrives as it makes meaning across the dissonance of understandings rather than only seeking common ground. It makes possible the multiplicity of worlds within worlds that refuse to be colonized through common categories, themes, and rubrics.

For me as a practical theologian, dialogical imagination has meant that I commit myself to the communal and creative reading and re-reading of the past, present, and future through the linked and varied experiences of Asian and Asian North American women. When we talk about ourselves as Asian and Asian North American women, or when we study our explicit experiences of trauma and joy, we are also connecting with our ancestors and enfleshing our hopes into future generations. Kwok shares that for her, postcolonial theology “involves cultivating a habit of decolonizing the mind, resurrecting suppressed theological knowledge, and taking part in social praxis to contest empire and change the world.”⁸ This pushing forward of epistemologies through epigenetic experience, recognizing hope through struggle, and practice of unlearning in order to learn anew, is what creates and recreates joy, and what resists the reification of pain. It is difficult and sacred work. In its essence, the theo-creativity of Asian and Asian North American women is an intentionally connected and necessary practice for the construction and reconstruction of narratives that are particular to our lives and peoplehood.

Practical theology and religious education have overarching interest in the deep understanding of what is happening daily in people’s lives. What is holy? What is painful? What is joyful? What are the deepest questions, beliefs, hopes, and values held by people and their communities? What is happening in the inner and communal life of people? Therefore, through dialogical imagination and theo-creativity inspired by Kwok’s life and scholarship, Asian and Asian North American women must continue to create and

⁷ Kwok Pui-lan, *Postcolonial Imagination and Feminist Theology* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2005), 38.

⁸ Kwok, “Epilogue,” 220.

recreate meaning and life together that is for us and by us. Kwok states, “For Asian theologians who were trying to gain their own voices, Asian theology should have emerged from and responded to Asian realities, rather than reflect someone else’s theological puzzles conceived in a faraway Western academy.”⁹ For practical theology and religious education among Asian and Asian North American women, this means we must approach the study of understanding who we are as individuals, and as both small and expansive communities, without the narratives laid over us by those who have no interest in our flourishing. In her 2011 American Academy of Religion Presidential Address, Kwok shared her early awakening to the way American anthropologist Clifford Geertz—who is often cited in the scholarship of practical theology—prioritized and privileged the cognitive understanding of religion, separating it from the power of social life and meaning making of religiosity in people’s lives.¹⁰ Without plumbing the depths of human experience and the richness of human understanding that cannot always be cognitively explained or described, we essentially study through the film of the white, Western, and Christian gaze.

It is this white and Christian gaze that Kwok is always simultaneously pushing back against and contending with in her postcolonial theology. This dialogical and confrontational approach is what makes her scholarship imperative for practical theologians, especially Asian and Asian North American religious educators. Whether it is the patriarchal conditions set upon our lives by our different cultural codes, or the white gaze that infects and affects how we understand ourselves and in relationship to other minoritized people, practical theology and religious education as Asian and Asian North American women require that we move beyond the cognitive to the tangible and intangible experience of life lived together in messy and complicated ways. In doing so, we are better able to push back against another byproduct of white supremacy, the Black and white racialized binary, and say, “Not today!” We can push back against further invisibilization and diminishment within the Black and white binary and instead, make our humanity visible and poignant, not only for ourselves but because all must flourish in order for all to be free. Kwok’s work

⁹ Kwok, *Postcolonial Imagination and Feminist Theology*, 41.

¹⁰ Kwok Pui-lan, “2011 Presidential Address: Empire and the Study of Religion,” *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 80, no. 2 (2012): 292.

helps us to ask ourselves what is possible without the contraptions of empire in its vast, varied, and internalized forms.

Theo-creativity as Justice Work

Kwok helps practical theologians and religious educators pose the question, “What if?” as part of our theo-creative life together. What might we become if we choose to tell our stories on our terms and not at the behest of whiteness and its constant weaponization of the Asian and Asian diasporic femme? What if our stories are told for *our* sakes and for those with whom we are building coalitions and solidarity, without the performative factor of pandering to whiteness’ questions and categorizations? Asian and Asian American lived theology without the inculcated response to whiteness or authenticating towards white affirmation is difficult, beautiful, and necessary.

Such a theological life might be wonderfully flexible! A seminary professor once told me that to build a healthy theology is to aspire to think of oneself like a sapling tree rather than a full-grown oak. In the midst of a storm, the sapling is able to bend and twist its trunk and limbs with the movement of the wind, no matter how strong the wind is. When the storm passes, it once again rises up, straight and tall, having survived by being flexible. The large oak on the other hand, can no longer bend like the sapling and in strong wind, its limbs and even trunk might be severed since it cannot move with the wind. Likewise, Asian and Asian North American practical theology does not have to exist or function as a rigid and immovable carbon copy of what has traditionally been a white normative and colonial practical theology. It need not recreate codes of dominance and subordination that white Christian and colonial theologies imposed among the world’s religions.¹¹ Our theologies need not mimic the type of white practical theology that positions itself on the outside and above communities rather than inside and accountable to them. Kwok’s dialogical imagination helps us ask, what is beyond empire as we know and understand it? What possibilities could be co-created and which collective dreams might we attend to as epistemological knowledge, and how might we take up space in ways that are inclusive and representative of justice making in the world? Kwok’s scholarship and questions challenges

¹¹ Kwok, “2011 Presidential Address,” 294.

practical theologians and religious educators to look towards the work of indigenous researchers and educators like Linda Tuhiwai Smith, Margaret Kovach, and Eve Tuck; Black researchers and educators like Evelyn Parker, Anne Streaty Wimblery, Lakisha Lockhart, and Almeda Wright; and Latinx, and queer scholars, alongside Asian and Asian North American systematic and practical theologians. We can build and shape our own futures toward a flourishing that resists the practice of whiteness in how we attempt to understand our people's lives and the meanings we make together.

Kwok Pui-lan's work pushes and pulls us toward a collective postcolonial Asian and Asian North American feminist imagination through the work of theology and is grafted into the work of Asian and Asian North American practical theologians as a practice of justice. Practical theology as justice work is bound to making visible the often-invisible lives of Asian and Asian North American women within the larger fabric of the world that empire has built and continues to sustain. Through Kwok's postcolonial feminist theology, we understand the work of practical theology is not only to gather information about what is happening in people's lives, but to reimagine together how the most minoritized might flourish and thrive in the face of the colonial imperative to destroy futures.

Theo-creative work as justice resists the diminishment often required within binary constructs set up to uphold erasures so that the work of justice and freedom is for some, not all. Kwok reminds us that the Asian female diasporic person is multiply located and displaced, "having to negotiate an ambivalent past, while holding fragments of memories, cultures, and histories in order to dream of a different future . . . it would require multiple tactics of intervention to unravel the dominant discourse and to negotiate a different cultural politics."¹² Empire recoils at the multiply located person. They are people whose boundaries and borders cannot contain or fix themselves to a particular place and time. Such people will not neatly or quietly disappear into the void between the polarities of a Black and white, male and female, queer and straight, America and foreign, world. Instead, such people brandish their distinctions and face their multitude of cardinal directions simultaneously, as a way to say as Kwok already does, "Here I am! Here we are!" The work of

¹² Kwok, "Epilogue," 46-47.

justice is done when we can fully see ourselves apart from the flattened narratives and contexts that empire designs and deigns for our existence. Justice and theo-creativity nurtures homelands in every place, makes connections across space and time, and validates what empire wants to make invalid and lost forever.

The resistance to invisibility means that Asian and Asian North Americans should also commit to resist pushing one another into conditions of erasure. Who do we imagine in our mind's eye when we claim Asian-ness or Asian North American-ness? We often forget that the term was coined in San Francisco in 1968 by activists who wanted to support and align with the movement of Black activists for civil rights.¹³ Their intention was to amplify the work of Black activists toward freedom as well as build coalitions across different Asian and Asian diasporic peoples. What is the point of our work as practical theologians to understand the past and present while glimpsing and imagining the future, if we cannot understand ourselves to be plural and dissonant, and to perceive this as a gift rather than something to be tamed and domesticated?

It is no secret that racism, anti-Blackness, and colorism exist within the Asian and Asian diasporic world. We must resist the romanticization of solidarity across Asian and Asian North American women's experiences. Solidarity work requires our blood, sweat, and tears. Solidarity requires self-examination and exorcism of internalized colonial attitudes and behaviors. Kwok argues that "female subalterns who experience the intersection of oppression in the most immediate and brutal way have epistemological privileges in terms of articulating a postcolonial feminist theology that will be more inclusive than others."¹⁴ In order to participate in the justice work of theo-creativity, we must tell the truth about how we have privileged some and participated in the diminishment of others of our siblings in order to hear our *particular* voices better. We must confront how *we also* willingly succumb to the lure of being operationalized and weaponized by whiteness to reify constructs of anti-Blackness in our communities.

Therefore, the work of the Asian and Asian North American practical theologian as inspired by the life and work of Kwok Pui-

¹³ Anna Purna Kambhampaty, "AAPI History: Activist Origins of the Term 'Asian American,'" *Time*, May 22, 2020, <https://time.com/5837805/asian-american-history/>.

¹⁴ Kwok, "Epilogue," 127.

lan is deeply and strategically connective and evokes the telling of hard truths. We connect, sinew to sinew, to one another and across racialization, cultures, ethnicities, and religions. We tell the truth about how we have edified one another and diminished one another, of our complicity to white supremacy and colonialism. In this work of truth-telling, we resist the promise of empire to sever and destroy. Kwok shows us how to do this work in her many edited and co-edited volumes. In particular, her co-edited volume, *Off The Menu: Asian and Asian American Women's Religion and Theology*,¹⁵ and her edited volume, *Asian and Asian American Women in Theology and Religion: Embodying Knowledge*,¹⁶ reveal the intentional weaving of various scholars' disciplines and commitments under the umbrella of a single but beautifully divergent community. Kwok and her co-editors work to bring together voices that might appear dissonant or disparate around a shared commitment to the postcolonial practice of liberation through the work of justice. They question and contend with the lacuna of scholarship in postcolonial theologies, just as practical theology must continue to do in its own guild, asking, "Whose lives and voices are missing?" Our individual and collective work as practical theologians and religious educators is not only to understand, but also to make a place for ourselves in order that new futures might take shape, futures that include all, where people of color are not ornamental to the work of practical theology and religious education, but central to how scholarship is shaped, implemented, and held accountable. Our shared futures in practical theology—beyond Christianity, whiteness, maleness, heteronormativity, and ableism—begin with the careful work of telling and listening to stories, creating and recreating meanings through them, writing down and reliving sacred memories, and resisting being told home is only elsewhere. Home is also here, where we place our feet, where we lay our heads, where we raise our children, where we bury our dead, and where we embrace our loved ones. We belong here too.

¹⁵ Rita Nakashima Brock et al., eds., *Off the Menu: Asian and Asian North American Women's Theology and Religion* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2007).

¹⁶ Kwok Pui-lan, ed., *Asian and Asian American Women in Theology and Religion: Embodying Knowledge* (Springer Nature, 2020).

Theo-Creative Justice as Religious Education

Included within the aims and goals of practical theology is the work and practice of religious education. Religious education is the study and work of understanding how religion, spirituality, and its practices are created, understood, and transmitted in people's lives. Therefore, Asian and Asian North American religious education is grounded in the deep connection between self and community across and beyond borders, religious and diasporic past, present, and future. Asian and Asian North American religious education is at its heart, transnational through the experience of forced displacement and immigration. It is also interreligious, as many Asian and Asian North American peoples have layered their deeply embedded indigenous religious and spiritual traditions into their practices of newer religious traditions. Further, religious education among Asian and Asian North American communities contains the possibilities and realities of holding multiple religious identities and traditions together, including a re-indigenization of spiritual and religious practice and belief. Kwok upholds all these complexities of human experience with religions as a cornerstone of her theological work. As a statement of her commitment to plurality as a way of life, Kwok states, "If Asian theology is not to be simply the mimicry of Western theology, Asian theologians must be bold enough to experiment with many different forms of cultural dialogues and negotiations."¹⁷ As a religious educator, experimenting to me means we will not always get everything right the first time. It means we commit to the art of praxis that continues to create and recreate as it practices.

Asian and Asian North American feminist religious education is also part of this complexity. As Asian women, we come from much more than a religiously Christian lineage. We come from Islam; Hinduism; Sikhism; Confucianism; Shamanism; Animism; Dharma; polytheism; pan-religious, double, and multiple belongings; among many other forms of religious and spiritual affiliation and encounter. We come from ancestor veneration and the understanding that we are also someone's ancestors. Many of our cultures and traditions rely on the transmission of religious and spiritual practice through the labor of women. Women are the memory and culture keepers. Women may not always have access

¹⁷ Kwok, "Epilogue," 161.

to the sacred texts, but they place themselves at the borders and boundaries of different and contesting religious and spiritual traditions. For instance, though a family might practice one religion outside the home, inside the home there are other intimate and many of what some might understand as contradictory practices taking place.

When I was in second grade, attending a Lutheran school in Los Angeles, I was friends with a Chinese American girl named Tracy. Though Tracy and I attended chapel every day at our elementary school, when we went over to her house to play, she and her mother taught me how to ask the Buddha for blessings at their home altar. They showed me how to stand, sit, hold my hands, how to incline my head, and what to say. Unlike the Christian tradition we were learning daily at school, I learned through Tracy and her mother that it was not considered selfish or wrong to ask for the things I wanted in this life, material or otherwise. Tracy and her mother practiced the work of bridging two religious traditions and they shared that understanding with me in a way that helped me realize I could hold dissonant understandings of faith and spirituality without my spirit being broken.

Religious education for Asian and Asian North American women strives to render these complex religious and spiritual genealogies and practices visible and palpable, as part of how we understand ourselves in connection to our communities. We can and should bring our pasts with us. Likewise, the generations who have come before us travel with us into our futures. As I have heard Kwok Pui-lan say in multiple addresses, “We bring the tribe along.”¹⁸ I have always taken her to mean that our tribe is not only our immediate community, but also those who built the community before us, and those who will come after us. The ancestors who shaped and formed us, and who now go with us. Those who will come after us are in our hearts and minds as we work towards collaborative futures. Perhaps, this is also the Divine going with us and waiting for us as well. Renita Weems, in a public lecture at Columbia Theological Seminary, described her inner dialogue with God when discerning her future vocation and profession.¹⁹ When

¹⁸ Kwok, “2011 Presidential Address.”

¹⁹ Renita Weems, “Reconciling a Spiritual Hunger with a Womanist Thirst: Growing up Black, Female, Theologically Conservative, and Socially Radical” (address presented at the 2020 Kathleen O’Connor Lectures, February 4, 2020).

she asked God what she should do and where she should go, God responded, "I will go with you where *you* choose to go." These profound words echo the story of Ruth that Kwok retells in *Postcolonial Imagination and Feminist Theology*. Home can be created and found in the company of others, not only in one's natal land.²⁰ The divine finds a home in us and our chosen path. Our ancestors have their home in us as we make our way in the world with them and with our other chosen kinship families.

Kwok Pui-lan's work across racialized and geographic understandings of community builds and rebuilds across lines systemically set up by white supremacy and empire. She teaches that we can become community to one another through the building of coalitions and solidarities toward mutual freedom. However, becoming community across peoples, cultures, geographies, and other markers of boundaries requires deep inner work and reflection. It requires a careful study of oneself and one's own closest communities of accountabilities. We must ask ourselves, what harm have I caused to others? What violence have I committed and perpetuated? What complicities to oppressions do I need to face and understand? For instance, as previously mentioned, the propensity to harbor and practice anti-Black racism among Asian and Asian North American peoples, in addition to colorism within our own communities, must be rooted out in order for our solidarities with Black communities to deepen. We do this by entering into dialogue with others, but also with ourselves, with our own kinfolk about the deepest internalizations of colonialism, racism, and empire that we possess. Kwok shows us that justice commitments require solidarities that are cultivated and proven through sustained modes of dialogue and life together. Movement building across transnational lines, racialized realities, and even across time and space, requires accountability at every moment of history.

Asian and Asian North American educators who frame religious education as a justice-oriented commitment might do well to follow the path across boundaries carved out by Kwok, particularly among minoritized people in North America. This is apt for us particularly as non-Black people of color who seek to resist the wedge identity between white and Black, and claim visibility within an ethos of solidarity with one another and with the most

²⁰ Kwok, "Epilogue," 102-4.

marginalized. Kwok's work pushes religious education towards justice and peacebuilding as co-informed work. We practice justice through education, by teaching, living, sharing, and listening.

Justice and the work of theo-creativity, for Kwok, includes global and environmental justice that ties into eco-feminist theologies that are deeply concerned with climate justice. This is especially imperative as climate injustices disproportionately affect the poor and nations struggling with uprooting the tenacious grip of colonization, all around the world. Kwok's interdisciplinary postcolonial scholarship constantly refers to not only the lived experiences of people and their emerging theologies, but also the global, economic, and climate driven conditions of their individual and collective lives. Through her epistemological commitments, Kwok reminds practical theologians and religious educators that there are systems and structures, historical pain points, that shape and form our encounter with religion and spiritualities and our understanding of ourselves in community.

Religious educators might consider their work as not only forming and shaping the faith of individuals and their communities, but also the world in which we inhabit together. Her edited volume, *Hope Abundant: Third World and Indigenous Women's Theology*, focuses on the theo-creativity of women most impacted by the globalization of systems,; structures of oppression; and the interlocking experience of poverty, climate change, capitalism, American exceptionalism, racism, and international politics.²¹ What are ways that religious education as justice work takes us beyond people and community, to other colonial subject and beings, animals, stolen resources like fossil fuels, water, and farm land? Kwok's feminist postcolonial theology helps us expand and reframe practical theology and religious education as inclusive of more than just human beings and individual human formations and experiences. She includes the systemic, structural, and physical ecologies that impact who and what all beings are, and who and what they become. What might change in the way we practice qualitative research as practical theologians and religious educators if we made explicit connections between the systems and structures of power, privilege, and the ensuing oppressions and the theologies that are

²¹ Kwok Pui-lan, "Introduction," in *Hope Abundant: Third World and Indigenous Women's Theology* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2010).

created, sustained, and passed down generationally, as a response to such conditions? We might work together to prevent falling deeper into irrecoverable crisis and death.

Conclusion

In light of Kwok Pui-lan's life and scholarship which grounds Asian and Asian North American feminist theologies, where does practical theology and religious education go from here? What is the role of the theo-creative Asian and Asian North American practical theologian and religious educator? Kwok reminds us that the expansive nature of postcolonial theology, which includes practical theology, is limitless. This expansiveness is thrilling. As she says,

[T]here is no one single postcolonial feminist theology that is adequate or comprehensive enough to cover the pluralistic postcolonial contexts, as the experiences of colonialism are far from homogenous. There will need to be a rainbow of colors, pluriphonic voices, and multiple rhythms, following different heartbeats.²²

For me, as a Korean American practical theologian and religious educator, Kwok's Asian postcolonial feminist theology reminds me to ground myself not in what feels like the perpetual whiteness of the field, but in the communities, people, and relationships that nurtured and challenged me right at home. She reminds me as a religious educator, that my formation and re-formation, memories, and re-mem-bering are central to the work before me. Her scholarship and mentorship help me take seriously the many homes that I claim as a point of resistance, against a white supremacist world that only wants to operationalize me, my cultures, and my body, as a weapon against those it wishes to dominate. It is good to be an Asian North American feminist practical theologian. I do not need to shrink myself to fit under the gaze of whiteness, which only desires to feed on me and not to nourish me. Kwok's postcolonial and theological posture toward the world and her very life reminds me to be expansive in my understanding of community, to be consistent in the work of accountability, and to always bring the community along.

²² Kwok, "Epilogue," 127.

How We Became a Race?
The Racialization of Asian Americans and Latino/as
within Theological Studies

Michelle A. Gonzalez

I am the daughter of immigrants, or to be precise, of political refugees that fled Cuba in 1960 after Fidel Castro's revolution. My parents fled Cuba quite abruptly. My grandfather, a journalist, had been imprisoned and word was my father was next. They did not have time to prepare, to say proper goodbyes. My parents raised me with a simultaneous emphasis on all things Cuban and a deep respect for the US. My earliest childhood memories are all in Spanish. I have no recollection of the English language as present in my life outside of school. However, in spite of being raised in the Cuban microcosm that is Miami, my parents also transmitted a deep love for the US to my brother and me.

My parents are the embodiments of the immigrant American dream. They came here with one hundred dollars smuggled in a pen, wrapped around the ink cartridge. After spending weeks in Miami facing signs that read, "No dogs, No Cubans," my father found a job at a dry cleaner. My parents took English lessons at night at the local public school. Eventually, they saved enough money to move to New York, where my father completed an MBA at New York University. My mother first worked at an orphanage and then as a bookkeeper. Then my parents moved back to Miami where my father completed his law degree. Throughout their lives, my parents constantly reminded my brother and me of the opportunities and freedoms in the US, things they have never taken for granted. I would like to think I do not take them for granted either. However, I also know that part of why my parents are immigrant poster children is the political refugee status they were given immediately, their white skin, and their professional backgrounds.

My husband and I were not always so lucky. Years ago, we were driving cross country in a U-Haul, bringing my belongings from California to Miami. We were living in Guatemala at the time, and my husband was here on a tourist visa. I was six months pregnant. While my husband was driving, we were pulled over by the police for going 10 miles over the speed limit, even though other cars were going much faster and passing us. We were nowhere near the US Mexican border. The officer took one look at my husband's Guatemalan license and passport (with the visa) and detained him in the patrol car. He then took my license, even though I was not driving, and left me in the truck. My husband was detained for 45 minutes as the officer ran an illegal background check on me, questioned my husband on the authenticity of our marriage since we had different last names, and demanded to know why I, a US citizen, was not carrying my passport—in the US. We were then forced to open our U-Haul, which I assumed was because the officer suspected that we had thirty Guatemalans stashed in the back. When we were finally released, I sat in the car furious, shaking, and nauseous. It did not matter that I was a US citizen in that moment or that I had a PhD; all that mattered was that my husband was Guatemalan. We were powerless and shamed before the officer, worried that if we “made any trouble,” Byron would somehow be deported or his passport flagged.

I begin with this story because one of the many insights from Kwok Pui-lan's work is the importance of autobiography. It is with a heavy heart that I write that the US has become a much more dangerous place for immigrants since the incident that occurred over a decade ago for Byron and me. I never thought I would have to explain to my sons about the vilification of racial/ethnic stereotypes and assure them that not everyone thinks they or individuals from our home countries are rapists, criminals, and drug dealers. I never thought we were moving toward a country that less and less resembles the country that welcomed my parents. While my parents entered the US with race and class privilege, the narrative of the US being a site to realize the immigrant American dream has been seriously contested if not obliterated in the past four years. And, sadly, this history of prejudice, violence, and denigration is one that Latino/as and Asian Americans share. In the spirit of engaging Kwok Pui-lan's work, this essay will explore the manner in which Latino/a theologians constructed a racialized definition of their

communities, with nods to the manner in it mirrors the Asian American experience. I emphasize the ways that minoritized populations in the US came to be defined overwhelmingly in racial categories, at the expense of both highlighting the importance of ethnicity and challenging the black-white binary of US racial constructions. I conclude with a discussion on Kwok Pui-lan's contributions that inform Latino/a theology.

Both Latino/as and Asian Americans have a troubled history of persecution and exclusion in the US. Whether it is the Chinese Exclusion Act, the Japanese Internment during WWII, or the separation of families at the Southern Border, immigration policy in this country has been shaped by attempts to keep Latin American and Asian peoples out of the US. As philosopher Linda Martín Alcoff powerfully writes, "Immigrants are today the most reviled group in America."¹ This discrimination becomes a key starting point for the theological voices of Asian American and Latino/a peoples. "Situated in a multicultural soil, Asian American theologians have reflected on their experiences of racial and cultural discrimination and have critically analyzed discrimination encountered to construct their own theologies."² Theologian Andrew Sung Park's statement could easily describe Latino/a theology as well. This experience of marginalization becomes a distinctive feature of Latino/a and Asian American theologies.

Similarly, the categories of Latino/a, Hispanic, and Asian American erase the multiple cultures and languages of the peoples that are grouped under them. Nonetheless, they are terms that continue to be embraced, though at times simultaneously problematized, by these communities. The terms Asian and Asian American should not eclipse the diversity of these communities, and they are also a conscious acknowledgement of a shared history. In the words of Grace Ji-Sun Kim, "It means that they are inheriting the myths, languages, and cuisines of certain cultures. Use of the designation also encompasses a commitment to looking at the world and themselves from particular vantage points. In addition,

¹ Linda Martín Alcoff, "Anti-Latino Racism," in *Decolonizing Epistemologies: Latino/a Theology and Philosophy*, eds. Ada María Isasi-Díaz and Eduardo Mendieta (New York, NY: Fordham University press, 2012), 107.

² Andrew Sung Park, "Asian American Theology," in *Liberation Theologies in the United States: An Introduction*, eds. Anthony Pinn and Stacey M. Floyd-Thomas (New York University Press, 2010), 115-30; 115-16

identification as an *Asian* theologian suggests solidarity with the struggles and destiny of specific peoples.”³ While these terms often refer to an ethnic or cultural grouping, within theology they are often understood and function as racial categories. One cannot reduce Latino/as or Asian Americans to one racial group. At the same time, describing them as ethnic groups can lead one to ignore the dynamics of race in these communities and can lead to ignorance surrounding how racist attacks and institutional racism target them. As Laura Gómez thoughtfully reminds us regarding Latino/as,

For one thing, the tendency to think of Latinos in ethnic terms perpetuates the idea that Latinos are perpetual foreigners rather than bona fide Americans. To speak of the immigrant but never the (native) American is fundamental to the racial logic of Latino subordination.... Another problem with viewing Latinos from an ethnic rather than a racial frame is that doing so pits them against African Americans in a way that support white supremacy.⁴

Reducing Latinx and Asian American peoples to an ethnicity can have the unintended effect of erasing racism geared towards and within the Latinx community, as well as create an oppositional structure that sets one minoritized population against the other.

In many ways, the racialized use of these terms was unavoidable. Latino/a and Asian American theologians emerged in the academy at a time when the line had already been drawn in the sand regarding liberationist discourses of minoritized groups in the US. The line was drawn by Black liberation theologians who made race the primary lens through which to understand oppression and liberation in the US. A similar line was drawn by Gustavo Gutierrez and Latin American liberation theologians to our South, where poverty and class became the epistemic framework through which to understand oppression and liberation in Latin America. Latino/a theologians, rightfully wanting to distinguish themselves from and avoid being eclipsed by their Latin American counterparts, did not engage in a class analysis. Instead they very clearly proclaimed that they were not Latin Americans and that their theological voice could

³ Grace Ji-Sun Kim, “Asian American Feminist Theology,” in Pinn and Floyd-Thomas, *Liberation Theologies in the United States*, 131–48; 135.

⁴ Laura E. Gómez, *Inventing Latinos: A New Story of American Racism* (New York, NY: The New Press, 2020), 13–14.

not be subsumed into a “one size fits all since they all speak Spanish” category. Instead, Latino/a theologians and Asian American theologians turned to their other minority counterparts and engaged the category of race. Instead of race, however, they emphasized culture and ethnicity while using racialized categories to do so.

In his overview of *mestizaje* in Latino/a theology, Jorge Aquino explores a broader discussion of “the racialized condition of Latin@ religious identity” by tracing the development of *mestizaje* in Latino/a theology. He outlines three stages in its development: the birth of Latino/a theology (1980-99), where Virgilio Elizondo’s work played a dominant role; a revision of *mestizaje* beginning in the 2000s; and a more recent third stage informed by Chicano/a theory and queer theory.⁵ Aquino highlights the distinctive ways in which Mesoamerican vs. Caribbean descent Latinos used the term in their early work. “The former (Elizondo, Bañuelos) tend to use *mestizaje* as both an analytic term and a term of self-identification. While Caribbean-descended scholars (Solivan, Segovia, and Espín) likewise use *mestizaje* as an analytic, they do not give themselves out as *mestizos* by descent or cultural identification.”⁶ In other words, Latino/a scholars from a background that was Central American or Mexican used *mestizaje* as both an analytic category and a descriptor of the Latino/a community. Scholars from regions such as the Caribbean used the hybridity and mixture introduced by *mestizaje* as an analytic category without defining themselves, or all Latino/as, as *mestizo* peoples.

Gabriel Haslip-Viera reminds us that there were not only *mestizos* and *mulatos* in Latin American and the Caribbean, but also *zambos* (peoples of African and Indigenous mixed racial decent). What emerged in the Spanish colonies was a society of castes (sociedad de castes) based on a racial hierarchy and pigmentocracy.⁷ I find the fact that Latino/a theologians have never written about *zambos* in a substantial matter to be telling. I would argue this is

⁵ Jorge A. Aquino, “*Mestizaje: The Latinoa/o Religious Imaginary in the North American Racial Crucible*,” in *The Wiley Blackwell Companion to Latino/a Theology*, ed. Orlando O. Espín (Chichester, England: Wiley Blackwell, 2015), 284.

⁶ Aquino, “*Mestizaje*,” 290.

⁷ Gabriel Haslip-Viera, “White Privilege and the Ideology of White Supremacy in the Spanish-Speaking Caribbean, Its Diaspora and Latin America, 1492–Present,” in *White Latino Privilege: Caribbean Latino Perspectives in the Second Decade of the 21st Century*, ed. Gabriel Haslip-Viera (New York, NY: Latino Studies Press, 2018), 13.

because Latino/a theology, from its earliest writings, has been engaged with situating Latino/a racial and ethnic identity within the black/white dualistic framework of race in the US. Demonstrating that we are not white, because whiteness equals oppression in the typography created by Black theologians, became of utmost importance for Latino/a theologians. And while I am not in any way arguing that Black theologians created this black/white framework, they do maintain it when their work ignores the complexity of racial identities and populations in the US today.

Connected to these racialized constructions of Latino/a identity and religion is the category of *latinidad*. As defined by Jennifer Loubriel,

Latinidad refers to the cultures of both the folks living in Latin America and those in the Diaspora which encompasses dozens of nations, cultures, and ethnoracial groups. Latin America is one of the most ethnically and racially diverse regions in the world. Each nation has its own specific history of slavery, colonization, and migration that creates different racial make-ups, tensions, and systems of oppression.⁸

In spite of this diversity, Loubriel rightfully points out, whites consistently are privileged in these numerous contexts. Latino/a theologians must find a way to honor the distinctiveness and complexity of how race and white privilege function in Latin America, Caribbean, and Latino/a contexts, that at the same time, says something meaningful about Latino/as as a whole.

Discussions of *mestizaje*, *mulatez*, *latinidad*, culture, and ethnicity are different ways of claiming a non-white identity as people of color, in spite of the fact that a significant portion of Latino/as in the US self-identify as white. Such self-identification must be nuanced however, for as Edward Telles argues, “Ethnoracial self-identification is clearly endogenous as it may involve a calculus based not only on appearance but also on variables such as culture, personal trajectory, and social status.... Race and ethnicity are not simply a matter of identity or consciousness. They also involve the

⁸ Jennifer Loubriel, “Indicators of White Privilege in Latinx Communities,” in *White Latino Privilege: Caribbean Latino Perspectives in the Second Decade of the 21st Century*, ed. Gabriel Haslip-Viera (New York, NY: Latino Studies Press, 2018), 113.

gaze of the other.”⁹ Race is not constructed in a vacuum; instead, it is culturally coded within minoritized populations, among minoritized populations, and the dominant culture. In a similar fashion, the racial diversity of Asian Americans becomes erased by the black-white paradigm of racial identity in the US, which is reinforced by the theological academy. Within the US theological landscape in the 1970s, ‘80s, and ‘90s, the dominance of Black liberation theology created a climate where race dominated conversations regarding oppression and liberation. Latino/a theologians entered into this conversation vehemently proclaiming the non-white (enter *mestizaje*) nature of Latino/a peoples, in spite of the fact that many of these theologians were either racially white or light skinned Latino/as. This is a significant tension, for historically, Latino/a theologians have embraced the notion that only Latino/as can write Latino/a theology, all the while claiming they are people of color when Latino/a theologians as a whole remain overwhelmingly racially white or light skinned. Proclaiming Latino/a theology as the discourse about (though not always by) people of color became a central origin narrative of Latino/a theology that continues to shape how Latino/a theologians construct Latino/a today.

These limitations can also be seen in the manner in which Latina feminist theologians have articulated the subject and focus of Latina theologies. Robyn Henderson-Espinoza challenges Latina feminist theology to emerge from its heteronormativity and engage the lives and struggles of queer persons.¹⁰ Nancy Pineda-Madrid challenges Latino/a theologians to be aware of their publics and the manners in which they self-limit their work, calling Latina theologians to contextualize the preferential option for Latina women as one that empowers all, not just Latinas.¹¹ Both scholars encourage us to look beyond the academic rhetorical implications of our identity constructions and engage how they impact concrete lives. This point is key. While I am concerned that Latino/a theologians continue to remain caught in the vicious cycle of

⁹ Edward Telles, *Pigmentocracies : Ethnicity, Race, and Color in Latin America* (University of North Carolina Press, 2014), 10.

¹⁰ Robyn Henderson-Espinoza, “Queer Theory and Latino/a Theologizing,” in *The Wiley Blackwell Companion to Latino/a Theology* (Germany: Wiley, 2015), 330.

¹¹ Nancy Pineda-Madrid, “Feminist Theory and Latina Feminist/Mujerista Theologizing,” in *Wiley Blackwell Companion*, 356.

defining who we are, it continues to be an important task. The construction of a collective Latino/a identity has concrete political, social, and economic implications for Latino/a peoples in this country.

While I do not think *mestizaje* should be used exclusively, I do contend that Latino/as do not fit into the binary racial paradigm of this country, and thus we must challenge it as a limited and reductionist manner of defining race in our contemporary world. In his critique of my work, Jorge Aquino pushes me to elaborate on clearer definitions of race, ethnicity, and culture. "Fundamentally, the social boundaries that limit the transculturation of black, Afro Cuban, and Latino/a identities are drawn through *racializing* operations meant to orient diverse 'minority' populations to their subordinate and separate roles on the construction of a *white* nation . . . In other words, racism *rules* cultural formation as the power to inscribe the discursive limits of culture."¹² Cultural and ethnic identity cannot escape racial identity, for in the US, culture and ethnicity are framed by race. The relationship between race and ethnicity is complex, with racial indicators often folded into ethnic categories, though ethnicity most often functions as an indicator of cultural identity.

A foundational principle of Latino/a theology is, to put it bluntly, the existence of Latino/as as a collective that shares substantial similarities and are more alike than unlike each other. A substantial amount of attention has been given by Latino/a theologians to that which unites Latino/as. And yes, while there have been nods to our internal diversity, I would say they are more nods than significant analyses about the manner in which gender, race, class, birthplace, generation, and sexual identity differentiate and distinguish our communities. What Tomás R. Jiménez says about constructions of Latino/a identity within sociology and race studies can be said of theologians as well:

A challenge for twenty-first-century scholarship is to make sense of the implications of growing *intra*-group diversity for boundaries and meanings of group identity. Meeting this challenge requires treating intra-group diversity not merely as an outcome of various social processes. Intra-group diversity must also be treated as the origin of

¹² Aquino, "Mestizaje," 297–98.

processes shaping the boundaries and meanings of group identities, as well as intergroup attitudes and relations.¹³

Highlighting that social class is one factor that creates ethnoracial diversity, the authors argue that inter-group diversity is based on both internal and external factors. In addition, Jiménez and his co-authors argue, “Scholarship on panethnicity demonstrates that the categories of ‘Asian’ and ‘Latino’ are based on constructed – and contested – boundaries meant to include members of multiple ethnoracial and national-origin groups.”¹⁴ Latin American, Caribbean, and Asian descent populations in the US are extremely diverse and distinctive. These categories are also not mutually exclusive, as there are Latin American and Caribbean peoples of Asian descent. And yet, in the US, we have too often enthusiastically and naively accepted the categories of Hispanic and Latino/a, a self-effacing gesture that defines *latinidad* purely in contrast to white Anglo culture. We are alike because of what we are not; we share that which makes us other. Our default is always the dominant white, Anglo culture of the US.

In this, we are not alone. New ethnographic research shows the perceptions of diversity within other ethnoracial groups matter for how definitions of group cohesion are constructed in diverse settings. For example, Jiménez’s research in a Black-majority-turned-Latino-majority city shows that the boundaries African Americans perceive amid dramatic immigration-driven change around them are not merely ethnoracial. Black residents treat speaking English and neighborhood tenure as important group boundaries that cut across ethnoracial lines. Thus, what some might describe as “Black/Brown” relations might be better described as “English-speaking/non-English-speaking,” “native/foreign-born,” or “longtime-resident/newcomer” relations.¹⁵ Jiménez’s study examines how African Americans in East Palo Alto (a historically Black majority city that is now Latino/a majority) understand their identity in light of an increasing Latino presence. From his scholarship on fieldwork, “Respondents point out how the ability to speak English and long-time residence in the neighborhood are

¹³ Tomás R. Jiménez, Corey D. Fields, and Ariela Schachter, “How Ethnoraciality Matters: Looking Inside Ethnoracial ‘Groups,’” *Social Currents* 2, no. 2 (2015): 108.

¹⁴ Jiménez, Fields, and Schachter, “How Ethnoraciality Matters,” 109.

¹⁵ Jiménez, Fields, and Schachter, “How Ethnoraciality Matters,” 110.

important factors facilitating ties and cooperation across ethnoracial lines.”¹⁶ His research highlights the importance of language in creating a sense of shared communal identity across different groups. For the Black population in East Palo Alto, language became an alienating factor for their connection to the growing Spanish-speaking Latino/a population. This case study opens up a Pandora’s box of the authenticity of Black-Brown solidarity, particularly among scholars of religion. Too often, Black and Latino/a scholars work independently of each other and do not support each other’s theological and broader academic agendas. Because Latino/as are not always people of color, the sense of solidarity and commitment to combat racism and white privilege can be challenged as suspect. Certain Latino/as do benefit from white privilege and many embrace a white identity in the US. The issue becomes, however, that race is not a sufficient lens through which to analyze the Latino/a as well as other minority experiences in this country.

Among Latino/a scholars, the category of ethnorace is gaining some currency as a manner of addressing both race and ethnicity. Linda Martín Alcoff proposes this as one way of understanding Latino/a identity: “Given that the representation of most Latinos includes both racial and ethnic elements, and given that the ethnic characteristic of Latino identity is often racialized as the purported effect of innate tendencies, this group is an obvious candidate for the term ‘Ethnorace.’” Building on the work of David Theo Goldberg, Alcoff defines ethnorace as “group identity categories that are viewed as interchangeably racial or ethnic, or have moved historically from one designation to another, and then sometimes back again.”¹⁷ Both are based on social constructions. While Alcoff is in no way dismantling the categories of race and ethnicity, she is attempting to introduce the term ethnorace in order to “provide

¹⁶ Tomás R. Jiménez, “Fade to Black: Multiple Symbolic Boundaries in ‘Black/Brown’ Contact,” *Du Bois Review: Social Science Research on Race* 13, no. 1 (Spring 2016): 159–80; 160.

¹⁷ Alcoff, “Anti-Latino Racism,” 115–16. “In insisting that race sometimes (is made to) assume(s) ethnic connotation, I am not so much submitting an explanation of race in terms of the ethnic paradigm as I am suggesting one possible contemporary meaning to race.” David Theo Goldberg, *Racist Culture: Philosophy and the Politics of Meaning* (Cambridge, MA: Blackwell, 1993), 78.

more linguistic options in order to develop better descriptive tools to characterize and understand current realities.”¹⁸

A substantial analysis of the manner in which the category of *ethnorace* can help us better understand Latino/a identity and its function is found in Nilda Flores-González’s study of Latino/a millennials. She highlights that the Latino millennials she studied struggled because they did not find a space in the black-white racial dualism of the US, yet they also did not find an alternate space of racial identification that was their own. She noted that in the absence of that racial category, they adopt panethnic terms such as Latino/a or Hispanic. Through her interviews, she uncovers that they categorize themselves as an *ethnoracial* group. “Their *ethnoracial* categorization includes racial and cultural attributes about what makes up the stereotypical Latino, such as ‘tan’ skin color, Spanish language, particular foods and music, family values, and Latin American ancestry.”¹⁹ Because these young people do not find themselves in the black-white binary of the US, “their racial miscategorization leaves them with a diminished sense of belonging.”²⁰ Flores-González acknowledges that while Latino/as can benefit from white privilege, their ethnicity becomes the avenue through which they are excluded from the dominant US American identity. However, this inclusion and exclusion can be fluid for Latino/as, for Flores-González describes Latino/as as “*boundary straddlers*” when it comes to their racial identity.²¹ The fluidity of Latino/a racial identity is also a hurdle for coalition building with Blacks in the US who cannot mask or transform their racial identity. For some Latino/as, identifying as a person of color is a choice, not a racial identity imposed on them. Too often, it is cultural, not racial

¹⁸ Alcoff, “Anti-Latino Racism,” 120. Zulema Valdez and Tanya Golah-Boza argue for an integrated understanding of ethnicity and race that brings the two categories together. Zulema Valdez and Tanya Golah-Boza, “U.S. Racial and Ethnic Relations in the Twenty-First Century,” *Ethnic and Racial Studies* 40, no. 13 (2017): 2201–2.

¹⁹ Nilda Flores-González, *Citizens But Not Americans: Race & Belonging Among Latino Millennials* (New York, NY: NYU Press, 2017), 4.

²⁰ Nilda Flores-González, *Citizens*, 4.

²¹ Nilda Flores-González, *Citizens*, 12. “For Mexicans, their often simultaneous categorization as white and nonwhite – perhaps best described as a form of bright-boundary straddling – was a rather stable feature of their experience.” Cybelle Fox and Tom Gugliemo, “Defining America’s Racial Boundaries: Blacks, Mexicans, and European Immigrants, 1890–1945,” *American Journal of Sociology* 118, no. 2 (September 2012): 335.

difference, that distinguishes Latino/as from the dominant Anglo culture. Building on Alcoff's understanding of ethnorace, Flores-González argues for this framework of Latino/a millennials' self-understanding, based on the "coupling of ethnicity and race," a physical "Latino Prototype," and the "weight of Latin American ancestry."²²

In our current context, we must also speak to the illegalization and criminalization of Latino/as that poses us and our culture as a threat to the US. Latin Americans have been dehumanized and vilified. This is not simply a racialized attack, but instead one where Latin American and consequently Latino/a cultures are seen as a parasite or virus infecting the US. And while the complexities of race and class shape one's privilege in the US, here I am not speaking of individuals actors but systematic and social marginalization. Categories such as panethnicity and ethnorace help us to better understand that one cannot reduce Latino/as to race.²³ I see the value of the category of ethnorace as a more complex manner of constructing Latino/a identity.²⁴ I also see the importance of scholars of ethnicity to come together and collaborate with scholars of race.²⁵ I believe questions remain regarding how ethnicity and race fit together, complement, and challenge each other. Also, any discussion of race among Latino/as in the US will be plagued by the

²² Nilda Flores-González, *Citizens*, 60.

²³ "Scholars have used the term panethnicity to describe when different ethnic or tribal groups cooperate, organize, and build institutions and identities across ethnic boundaries." Dina Okamoto and G. Cristina Mora, "Panethnicity," *Annual Review of Sociology* 40 (July 2014): 220.

²⁴ "Ethnorace may or may not be to the solution but it does have the merit of recognizing that both ethnicity and race involve hierarchies and exclusions along with positive in-group meanings and sources of community and agency." Amanda E. Lewis and Tyrone Forman, "Race, ethnicity, and disciplinary divides: what is the path forward?" *Ethnic and Racial Studies* 40, no. 13 (2017): 2223.

²⁵ "We maintain that ethnicity and race scholars need to engage in dialogue, not because ethnicity and race are the same thing, but because they are distinct concepts that bring different relationships and perspectives to bear on pressing social issues. Ethnicity and race are both socially constructed, but they are not socially constructed in the same ways. Race and ethnicity explain different aspects of inequality that are conditioned by distinct social relationships embedded within a highly stratified context; a consideration of both explains more, and with more nuance, than ethnicity or race alone." Zulema Valdez and Tanya Golash-Boza, "Towards an intersectionality of race and ethnicity," *Ethnic and Racial Studies* 40, no. 13 (2017): 2256.

manner in which race is constructed in their home nations. In other words, Latino/as do not enter into discussions of the black-white binary in the US without their own constructions of race from their Latin American backgrounds. And in this, each nation is distinctive.

In her writings, Kwok cautions minority theologians of the dangers of retrieving ethnicity and culture, which can become co-opted and marginalized by the dominant discourse. "In other words, minority discourses of protest can be easily co-opted and incorporated into the celebration of difference and diversity. Moreover, there is a need to place racial relations in the US in the wider history of the development of colonialism and to link what is happening inside the US with struggles in the rest of the world."²⁶ Her words should be heeded, for Kwok reminds us that we must contextualize our discussions of race, ethnicity, and culture in light of the colonialist agenda that marks the history and contemporary context of minoritized peoples in the US. We must also, she rightfully points out, connect our discussions of race and ethnicity to a broader international platform.

Kwok has argued for a postcolonial liberation theology that speaks to the independence from colonial rule and the political and economic realities faced by Asians. Seriously engaging this legacy also requires complicating how categories such as gender function in our theologies. During colonialism, "White women were not shown to be natural allies of brown women, nor did their sameness of gender help the two groups to bond easily. White women's power was dependent on the white men's, and they constantly feared that brown women would usurp their position."²⁷ Brown women become the passive victims of colonialism, depicted as victims of Brown men and therefore saved by white colonists. This sets the stage for her emphasis on women who are the victims and not the agents in biblical text. For Kwok, feminist biblical criticism has too often emphasized women with agency in the text, ignoring those women in the Bible who are present yet too often powerless. Her scholarship also emphasizes the manner in which gender is

²⁶ Kwok Pui-lan, "Feminist Theology and the New Imperialism," *Political Theology* 8, no. 2 (2007): 141-55; 147.

²⁷ Kwok Pui-lan, "Unbinding Our Feet: Saving brown Women and Feminist Religious Discourse," in *Postcolonialism, Feminism & Religious Discourse*, eds. Laura E. Donaldson and Kwok Pui-lan (New York, NY: Routledge, 2002), 62-81; 66-67.

racialized, and that we cannot ignore how race and ethnicity function in gender constructions.

Key to her theology is what she describes as the postcolonial imagination: “a desire, a determination and a process of disengagement from the whole colonial syndrome which takes many forms and guises.”²⁸ This postcolonial theology foregrounds the intersection of economics, cultural production, and religion. This is contextualized in light of her rightful emphasis on the intimate relationship between Christianity and colonialism. This spills out in the manner in which theological education is a colonial project: “Only after we had somehow mastered the texts of these theological giants and indulged in their so-called ‘seminal’ works, were we allowed to do something that really interested us. Like the colonial past, these theological texts became part of the worlds we inhabit, a heritage we cannot fully embrace, yet cannot erase.”²⁹ One only has to look at the body of work of Latino/a theologians, including my own, whose work often includes the writings of European and Euro-American theologians as a way of legitimizing our scholarship as authentic theology.

Kwok is not only interested in educational institutions, but she also pushes ecclesial spaces to address the ways in which they legitimize a colonialist, Western agenda. Building on postcolonial theorists, Kwok describes the need for churches to cultivate a Third Space, so that churches can encounter the sacred in all of their plurality and hybridity and explore new ways of being church. In this Third Space, we become vulnerable and risk encountering the other, the disenfranchised, and marginalized.³⁰ I find this insight particularly fundamental for Latino/a theologians to take seriously. The fundamental starting point of Latino/a theology is the lived religious practices of Latino/a Christian communities throughout the US. The emphasis is overwhelmingly ecclesial, while nodding to the fact that many Latino/a religious practices exist on the border of Christian ecclesial structures and, in some cases, incorporate non-Christian elements within them. Within this ecclesial framework, an

²⁸ Kwok Pui-lan, *Postcolonial Imagination and Feminist Theology* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2005), 16.

²⁹ Kwok Pui-lan, “Feminist Theology at the Dawn of the Millennium: Remembering the Past, Dreaming the Future,” *Feminist Theology* 27 (2001): 6–20; 7.

³⁰ Kwok Pui-lan, “Postcolonial Preaching in Intercultural Contexts,” *Homiletic* 40, no.1 (2015): 9–20.

analysis such as Kwok's can aid Latino/a theologians to better articulate and challenge churches and their relationships with Latino/a communities.

Latino/a religion broadly, and Latino/a Christianity in particular, is not limited to the four walls of a church. And here too, Kwok's insights on the religious plurality of Asia can help Latino/a theologians address the complex religious landscape of their communities. She emphasizes the multi-religious context of Asia that requires a dialogue between the biblical world and the Asian world, and uses a multi-faith hermeneutics. Kwok argues for a dialogical imagination in her biblical hermeneutics, where there is a dialogue between the Bible and Asian religious texts and practices. "It is dialogical, for it involves a constant conversation between different religious and cultural traditions. It is highly imaginative, for it looks at both the Bible and our Asian reality anew, challenging the established 'order of things.'"³¹ Examples of this dialogue include the use of Asian myths, legends, stories, and social biography. In her work, she problematizes the authority of scripture and canon and the normativity of the biblical text.³² More importantly, she reminds us of the colonialist impulses behind biblical Christian normativity: "If other people can only define truth according to the western perspective, then christianization really means westernization."³³ No one know this better than Latin American peoples.

Latino/a theologians do not often engage the work of Asian or Asian American theologians. When the dialogue is not with Europe and Euro-Americans, we turn to our Black colleagues and their scholarship. I hope this will change. This essay has attempted to point out a few points of intersection in our community, and perhaps more importantly, through the work of Kwok Pui-lan, demonstrate that we Latino/as have much to learn from our Asian and Asian American colleagues.

³¹ Kwok Pui-lan, "Discovering the Bible in the Non-Biblical World," *Semeia* 47 (1989): 31.

³² Kwok, "Discovering the Bible," 36. "The critical principle lies not in the Bible itself, but in the community of women and men who read the Bible and, through their dialogical imagination, appropriate it for their own liberation." Kwok, "Discovering the Bible," 19.

³³ Kwok, "Discovering the Bible," 19.

Violent Extremism in a Globalized World: A Threat to the Common Good

Eleazar S. Fernandez

We are witnessing the rise of violent extremism in various parts of the world following the event of September 11, 2001, and the trend continues. It is not a surprise that it has been at the forefront of our attention and has become a defining issue of our time, especially when it culminates into acts of terrorism. It has become an issue that cannot be brushed aside not simply because of the increasing number of casualties, but because it has defined who we are as a people and as a global society.

I am aware of the difficulty in defining “violent extremism” because it is a politically loaded term, like the term “terrorism.” The term “violent extremist” has been hurled loosely against those who hold opposite views to one’s own. Because of its nebulous character and our difficulty in defining the term, there is a temptation to say, following the now in-famous words of Justice Potter Stewart, “I know it when I see it.”¹ This inability to define the term has serious consequences: it leads to our inability to respond appropriately and effectively to the challenge. It is my hope that this essay contributes to the sharpening of our understanding of violent extremism and enables us to respond better in preventing and undoing it.

It should be noted that not all extremists are violent, and not all violence is extremism. There are extremists who would rather escape from this world. Violence is pervasive, but most violence is not extremist. Not all terrorists are extremist, not all extremists are terrorists. Violent extremism is not identical with terrorism. Violent extremism is a belief system.² Violent extremism is a belief system

¹ Cited in J. M. Berger, *Extremism* (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 2018). 1. Emphasis supplied.

² Berger, *Extremism*, 30.

that justifies, encourages, condones, and supports terrorism.³ On the other hand, terrorism is a tactic and it employs violence to achieve an ideological goal, which is directed primarily at the civilian population. Terrorism, from the Latin word *terreo* (to fill with panic, alarm, and great fear), is meant to terrorize or spread great fear among the populace. It is primarily an attack against society and human security.⁴

Lisa Schirch's account of the four characteristics of violent extremist beliefs in her work, *The Ecology of Violent Extremism*, is useful here because it provides specificity: (1) violence is necessary because it is tactically superior and/or redemptive; (2) brutal violence against unarmed civilians is justified to achieve purification of society and/or because civilians are responsible for their governments; (3) violent extremism follows an authoritarian narrative that is intolerant, patriarchal, and anti-participatory democracy; and (4) violent extremists embrace ideological goals related to their identity and grievances.⁵ With these four characteristics of violent extremist beliefs before us, let us test them in relation to some known expressions of violence and extremism. Schirch offers a few test examples to prove the usefulness of her categories.

On June 2016, in Orlando, Florida, Omar Mateen, an Afghan refugee with a history of mental illness, entered a gay nightclub and killed fifty people. Was this an act of terrorism, especially given that from the dominant US Islamophobic imagination, Mateen is a Muslim, or because of loose gun laws which allow an ill person easy access to guns? A tape-recorded message was found in which the gunman pledged allegiance to ISIS and expressed his political goal of preventing US violence in Syria and Iraq against Muslims. Although Mateen acted on his own, he subscribed to extremist ideology: clear political goals, superiority narratives, and the necessity of brute violence targeting civilians. On these bases, Mateen's action falls under the category of violent extremism.

On August 2017, white nationalists marched in Charlottesville, Virginia, to protest the plan to remove the statue of Confederate general Robert E. Lee from the city park. James Fields Jr., a white

³ Lisa Schirch, ed., *The Ecology of Violent Extremism: Perspectives on Peacebuilding and Human Security* (New York: Rowman and Littlefield, 2018), 5.

⁴ Schirch, *The Ecology of Violent Extremism*, 6-7.

⁵ Schirch, *The Ecology of Violent Extremism*, 16-17.

nationalist, rammed his car into the counter protestors, killing one woman and injuring others. The white nationalist propaganda asserts white supremacy, carries a grievance against racial/ethnic minorities, and gives explicit directions to use violence to achieve their political goals. The white nationalist group that cultivates people like James fits well under the category of violent extremism.

Shifting to other groups, How about the Black Lives Matter (BLM) movement? The Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) has monitored Black Lives Matter (BLM) movement for what it refers to as “black supremacist extremist” or “black identity extremists.” BLM leaders resist such labels and accusations and reaffirm their commitment to human rights and rejection of the use of violence. BLM does not fall into the category of violent extremism because it does not justify killing and it does not articulate a superiority narrative.

School shootings that are carried out by white young men with mental illnesses do not fall into the category of violent extremism. Even though they inflict mass casualties with gruesome spectacles, they do not have coherent ideology or political goals. They do not carry out their actions under the narrative of racial-ethnic superiority. Hence, they are not considered violent extremists.

Framework for Understanding the Rise of Violent Extremism: The Ecology Metaphor

Ecology is a useful metaphor for understanding and dealing with violent extremism. Ecology calls our attention to the interweaving or interconnection of everything. Ecological metaphor communicates the point that violent extremism is not something separate from the rest of society. What happens in one area affects another; intervention in one area will have an effect on another. Because everything is interrelated or intertwined, a systems-based approach is important to understanding and intervening in violent extremism. We cannot approach the issue in isolation from other issues. It takes us in the direction of interdisciplinary work. No single field has the explanatory power to illumine all aspects; no single approach can address the issue comprehensively and effectively; no single solution is possible.

Beyond saying that there is no single solution to violent extremism, an ecological or systems-based approach reminds us that the solutions we propose must be evaluated in a holistic manner. The

positive side of interconnection is that what we do in one aspect will have an impact in another, which means that when done right, our actions will have positive consequences on others. On the other hand, when we fail to see the effects of a solution in relation to the wellbeing of the whole system, the intended solution may cause more harm rather than bring healing to the system. There have been several cases where solutions, because proponents have failed to see the intricate interweaving of the system, have led to more problems.

It would help us understand better if we bring to our attention two ecological metaphors that have been commonly used in counter-terrorism discourse: the swamp metaphor and the cancer metaphor. A swamp or wetland is an important part of the earth's ecosystem; it plays an important role in maintaining ecological balance. Swamps or wetlands act as giant sponges and reservoirs from heavy rain and flashfloods, thus moderating their destructive effects. They protect seaboards from storm surges and soil erosion, especially swamps with healthy mangroves. Swamps also serve as filters for waste coming from factories and homes. Swamps and wetlands are the natural habitat of various species of plants and animals. But there is a sinister and dreaded side of swamps that has settled in the minds of many. Swamps can be the habitats of dreaded creatures, like alligators and snakes. They can also be the breeding grounds of mosquitoes and pests that are carriers of harmful pathogens that can cause diseases. And, because many wetlands have become wastelands or dumpsites, they are associated with foul and toxic odors. Once wetlands are associated with wasteland, abuse of wetlands gets perpetuated.

With this social imaginary of swamps and wetlands, it is not a surprise why "draining the swamp" has become a popular metaphor for those who are working to counter terrorism. Heads of state, military generals, and counter-terrorism experts talk about "draining the swamp" in their programs to combat terrorism. "Draining the swamp" is a metaphor for destroying the habitat where terrorists live or get their support. It is a metaphor for bombing villages and cities that are infested by terrorists. In this swamp society, the terrorists are comparable to the alligators and snakes that must be flushed out and killed. When the base or habitat of the terrorists is destroyed, the terrorists are left with no means of support. Thus, they will not flourish. This kind of interpretation is problematic and it exacerbates the challenge. Wrongly, it assumes

that alligators, snakes, scorpions, mosquitoes, and others are the problems, when in fact they are part of the ecosystem. "Draining the swamp" would not only kill alligators, snakes, scorpions, and mosquitoes, but also other forms of life in the habitat. Bombing villages to flush out terrorists has not been effective in preventing violent extremism and terrorism. On the contrary, the destruction of villages has undermined the resilience of the villagers, making them more susceptible or vulnerable to violent extremism. A village cannot be saved by getting bombed.

In spite its weaknesses, if used properly, the swamp as an ecological metaphor may be helpful. The swamp itself is not the problem, nor are the alligators and snakes. They are all part of the larger ecosystem. What is foreign to the swamp's ecosystem is the bomb or the chemicals that are dumped into the swamp, perhaps with the good intention of flushing out toxins in the swamp. But this is dangerous and could backfire, especially since we do not know how living creatures in the swamp would respond to the intrusion of new chemicals. The intrusion of chemicals into the swamp may be responsible for the rise of cancer among humans and animals in and near the swamp.

This leads us to the second metaphor that is widely popular with government officials, social activists, and among those who are at the forefront on the war on terror: the cancer metaphor. When applied to the war on terror, it is obvious that terrorists are considered the cancerous cells that must be removed by "surgical strikes," and this must be done decisively and with urgency before the cancerous cells spread at a level that would overwhelm the social body. Another common approach in dealing with cancerous cells is by chemotherapy, the purpose of which is to kill the cancerous cells to prevent them from spreading. In relation to terrorism, the terrorists have to be stopped before they can spread and do more damage.

It is important to have a clear understanding of how cancer cells develop and how violent extremist terrorists develop for the cancer metaphor to be useful and effective. When cells grow in size or speed beyond the norm and start to invade other areas, they have reached a cancerous level. Like normal cells that undergo mutation, individuals can undergo mutation leading to violent extremism and terrorism when the right combination of factors is present. A crucial difference, however, must be noted: while cancer cells may never

revert back into healthy cells, individuals can experience healing and be restored into healthy individuals. In this regard, the cancer metaphor gives the impression that the individual is beyond restoration to become a healthy member of society.

Similar to the metaphor of “draining the swamp,” which also brings unintended consequences that are disastrous, the common cures for cancer also have consequences that can be destructive. Chemotherapy, for example, kills not only the bad cells but also the good cells. When the good cells are killed in the process of killing the bad cells, the individual is left without natural defenses to fight against common diseases, so their immune system is compromised and the individual is vulnerable to diseases. Sometimes it is difficult to tell if the person has died of cancer or from the effects of chemotherapy. When applied to society, immuno-compromised communities are more vulnerable to violent extremist ideas and radicalization. This demonstrates that responses to violent extremism and terrorism, like responses to cancer, must be assessed ecologically or holistically, if the intended response is not to exacerbate the problem but to contribute to greater well-being. By maintaining a healthy village (healthy swamp or healthy body), we can address soundly and effectively the challenge of violent extremism and terrorism, which is a product of an unhealthy relationship within the social body. The challenge is to find healthy alternatives to cancer treatment or approaches to restoring the vitality of the swamp. In the case of cancer, it may involve some healing therapies that restore the vitality and resilience of the body.

We are familiar with medical approaches that exacerbate rather than provide solutions to existing problems or challenges. Many treatments target one physical problem, but may have side effects or collateral damages which the patient does not know or is not informed of. For example, prolonged intake of some medications to cure heart disease or diabetes may damage the liver, kidney, and pancreas, while others may deplete calcium-magnesium in the body, which causes severe muscle cramps. That is why a holistic approach is needed, because the human body is one living organism. A medical practitioner should know how his or her prescription would affect the whole human body, not just on the diseases that he or she is trying to address.

Converging Drivers of Violent Extremism

There is not a one-directional trajectory of causes and effects when we talk of the growth of violent extremism. A better explanation is the convergence and interweaving and inter-influencing of factors and drivers of violent extremism. I will identify a few of these converging factors and drivers.

Community Grievances

Community grievances are among the main drivers of violent extremism and terrorism. In any account of violent extremism, a list of grievances has come out as motivations for extremist violent acts. Grievances cover three major aspects: economic, political, and social aspects.

Economic inequality is one of the drivers of violent extremism and terrorism. Again, I am using drivers rather than causes because there are no direct correlations between socio-economic inequality and deprivation and violent extremism and terrorism. Many of those who are economically deprived are not violent extremists and have not resorted to terrorism. Also, violent extremists and terrorists are not limited to the economically deprived. Some of those who participate in violent extremist acts are well educated and affluent. Still, socio-economic inequality is a factor or a driver, and it has emerged as one of the grievances of violent extremists and terrorists.

Without a doubt, the global market has produced immense wealth. Global daily financial transactions have totaled in the trillions. Technological advancements have led to increased production and distribution of goods and services. Notwithstanding all these achievements, many are without basic necessities, and many are dying of hunger. Death has been the plight of many amidst the rhetoric that economic globalization provides salvation. Many are dying slowly due to sickness and starvation, while others are left with no other options but to die quickly. The poverty and deaths of so many prove the sinister side of the rising tide of economic globalization. It is not a rising tide that will lift all boats in an ocean of poverty. Contrary to the belief that "a rising tide raises all boats," the reality has been that "a rising tide raises all yachts."⁶ Worse, the

⁶ Marcus Borg, *The Heart of Christianity: Rediscovering a Life of Faith* (San Francisco: Harper, 2003), 141.

poor do not even have boats, and they are drowning in the tsunami of corporate profits.

When economic disparity and massive poverty become the order of the global household, we can expect negative consequences: poor health, short life span and high mortality rate, high illiteracy rate, stagnant communities, increased criminality, and rampant depression. Poverty begets disease and disease begets poverty. Those who cannot afford to buy nutritious food and have no access to safe drinking water, sanitary living conditions, basic health care, and good education are more likely to get sick. When they are sick, they cannot support their families; thus, the cycle of poverty and disease continues. In considering a society as a whole, we find that the greater the economic disparity among its people, the worse the overall health of the people in that society. Poor communities lack good educational opportunities for advancement; hence, the likelihood of being buried in their miserable situation is high. Furthermore, social inequity, economic disparity, and massive poverty lead to socio-political instability and a host of social maladies. Socio-political instability leads to extremism of various sorts and violence. With lives ruined and dreams turned to dust, people are left vulnerable to gang recruitment and other violent extremist organizations.

Political grievances go along with economic grievances as drivers of violent extremism and terrorism. In fact, political grievances are more prevalent than economic grievances in the rhetoric and recruitment materials of violent extremist groups. Corruption, political violence, repression, militarization, and human rights abuses all contribute to fertilizing the soil for violent extremism to sprout and grow. The US Agency for International Development (USAID) has named seven political grievances that correlate with violent extremism, namely: (1) denial of basic political rights and civil liberties; (2) gross violation of human rights; (3) corruption and impunity of the elites; (4) safe havens, poorly governed or ungoverned areas; (5) violent local conflicts that can be exploited; (6) state sponsorship of violent extremist groups; (7) weak or nonexistent oppositions (USAID 2009).⁷ In many of these politically volatile situations, Western governments, particularly the US, have supported or have been identified with authoritarian and

⁷ Schirch, *The Ecology of Violent Extremism*, 37.

repressive regimes in various parts of the world. From the point of view of the politically disenfranchised, Western governments and their local lackeys have become allies in the oppression and marginalization of the masses. It is no wonder that state governments (near enemy) and Western governments (far enemy) have received the ire of the disenfranchised and have become targets of violent extremisms and terrorisms.

Social grievances are also drivers of violent extremism, especially social exclusion, discrimination, and victimization. Social exclusion and discrimination are especially common experiences among diaspora communities in their host countries. There are several cases of this in Europe, especially with the influx of more refugees. When walls of exclusion and discrimination rise, the excluded and discriminated are forced to find people who are in the same situation who can identify with their predicament. In this situation, they are more vulnerable to the influence of violent extremist ideas.

Identity and Belonging

Identity is a relational concept; it exists and develops in relationship with others. Identity develops in relation to one's surroundings, particularly in relationships with people and social events. Thus, social relations constitute the main ingredients for identity formation. Identity evolves through the process of differentiation. Several factors contribute to this process. The development of national consciousness, for example, may be triggered and hastened by outside political forces, such as conquest and colonization by foreign powers. The once loosely defined and scattered multi-ethnic groups may feel the need to bond together in response to invaders. As time evolves, a national consciousness or a nation-state may emerge. Human communities see and construct difference in the process of identity formation. The constructions of "we" and "they" and "us" and "them" are all part of identity formation. There may be difference/es, but difference is not the problem; the main problem lies in attitudes toward difference and how differences are dealt with. To be different from another is not the same as being against. The good news is that there can be difference without going against each other. Audre Lorde puts it succinctly: the main problem "is rather our refusal to recognize those differences, and to examine the distortions which result from our

misnaming them and their effects upon human behavior and expectation.”⁸

Sadly, the dominant identity formation in our society is that of being “over against the other.” It seems easy to fall into this destructive pattern; it is basically finding an identity that is set in opposition to another. Even more, it elevates one’s primary identity marker over another. In the context of unequal power relations, it can be individually and corporately imposed on others. When one’s identity is equated with the cultural norm, systemic violence starts. Various forms of fundamentalism, whether religious or secular, can be interpreted as an expression of an identity posed “over against the other.” We can see ominous symptoms when markers of identity and belonging are redrawn and religiously policed. Ominous symptoms are present when the demarcation line between in-group and out-group thickens and strict policing is enforced to protect the purity of the in-group from the contaminant, the out-group, and when betrayal of this purity map is deemed a serious and unforgivable sin. The constricting mindset thickens and worsens when it turns into “us-versus-them,” and the “them” (out-group) is scapegoated as the cause for the crisis. When the out-group or the scapegoated is seen as an embodiment of the demonic and the world is seen as a battlefield between good and evil, violence against the scapegoated is just a hairline away. Labeled as such, when violence is unleashed against the scapegoated and the demonized, their suffering would deserve little or no empathy at all.

There are several components around which identity and belonging are formed. It may be around ethnicity-nationality, language, race, gender, sexuality, religion, and shared experiences, including victimization, humiliation, and fear. “Identity politics,” says Scott M. Thomas, “draws its strength from bonds of culture, religion, history, and memory, and not entirely from material or functional sources.”⁹ One of these strands may play a prominent role over another depending on the context and stage in one’s life. White nationalists fear that the changing demographic as a result of immigration will change the white identity of the US. Muslim

⁸ Audre Lorde, *Sister Outsider: Essays and Speeches* (Freedom, CA: The Crossing, 1984), 115.

⁹ Scott M. Thomas, *The Global Resurgence of Religion and the Transformation of International Relations: The Structural Struggle for the Soul of the Twenty-First Century* (New York: Palgrave, 2005), 122.

extremists fear that Jews and Christians are in the business of destroying Islam. German neo-Nazis fear that Muslims immigrants are going to destroy their culture and way of life.

Ethno-nationalism is a major factor in identity formation that contributes to the many drivers of violent extremism. We can observe this phenomenon in the rise of Indian nationalism (Hindutva) and ethno-religio-nationalism in Myanmar and Sri Lanka. Ethno-nationalism is also present among minoritized ethnic groups that are struggling for political independence but are constantly crushed and frustrated by the dominant groups, such as the Tamils in Sri-Lanka, Uighur Muslims in the Peoples Republic of China, and Chechen in Russia. An idea that I have found useful in understanding the drivers of violent extremism and terrorism is one proposed by Deepa M. Ollapally, which is consistent with my view that the drivers must be seen in convergent dynamic interaction.¹⁰ Focusing on South Asia, Ollapally contends that the trajectory of violent extremism must consider a three-way identity struggle: ethno-religious, secular, and geopolitical identities.¹¹ This does not discount other drivers, such as relative economic deprivation, elite manipulation, and state repression and lack of political institutional access. Rather, it is meant to fill some gaps of the commonly identified drivers.

The ethno-religious dimension has been identified as one of the fault lines in violent extremist conflicts. Although distinct, both ethnic and religious dimensions often converge in a conflictive situation, which is why it makes sense to merge both: ethno-religious. It is not accurate to say that ethnic formation is the main driver of violent extremism because people of various ethnic groups have a long history of dwelling peacefully. It is common to find those who say that religion is the main driver, especially with the proliferation of jihadist terrorisms and the rise of Islamophobia. However, religion cannot be considered as the main driver because people of different religious affiliations have a long history of dwelling peacefully. There must be other dimensions at play when these two (ethnicity and religion) come together that provide the occasion for the rise of violent extremism. Why do some turn to extremism and others choose a moderate path?

¹⁰ Deepa M. Ollapally, *The Politics of Extremism in South Asia* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2008).

¹¹ Ollapally, *The Politics of Extremism*, 2-3.

The notion of the “secular” must be brought into the mix.¹² A weak secularism, more particularly “political secularism,” contributes to extremist outcomes when it merges with ethno-religious extremism. Strong political secularism provides that “principled distance” in which the interest of the dominant religious group is not equated with the interest of the state, and the voices of other ethnic-religious groups are not silenced, but allowed enough participation in the political life.

There is one more that is often overlooked or less explored which, for Ollapally, plays a crucial role: “geopolitical identity.” This is particularly true in the South Asian context. Conflicts between states and their power plays and the involvement of powerful nation-states all contribute to the drivers of violent extremism. With ethnic, religious, and linguistic identities spilling across state borders, and neighboring nation-states asserting sovereignties being drawn into the conflict, we can see how geopolitical identity intertwines with violent extremism.¹³

What triggers or tilts the balance to extremism needs to be seen, contends Ollapally, against the “broader congruence or competition between secular, ethnoreligious, and geopolitical identity formations. It is the outcome of this struggle (or convergence for that matter) that all too often tips the balance toward moderation or extremism.”¹⁴

Ideology

Some of the drivers of violent extremism can be classified under ideology. Ideological drivers may include political, economic, social, and religious ideologies. Violent extremism is driven by ideologies of different kinds. For white nationalists, their political ideology is white supremacy. With white supremacy as the ideological line, it is not surprising that it stands in opposition to immigration (except immigrants from white countries), multiculturalism, and diversity, for its overriding concern is to maintain the purity of the white race. For the Hindu-nationalist, it is the revival of Hindutva; for the Sinhalese-fundamentalist, it is Sri Lanka for the Sinhalese.

¹² Ollapally, *The Politics of Extremism*, 15.

¹³ Ollapally, *The Politics of Extremism*, 3-4.

¹⁴ Ollapally, *The Politics of Extremism*, 14.

Religious ideology, among others, occupies a prominent place in violent extremism discourse and is considered a major driver. There are those who consider religion as the major culprit, such as Christopher Hitchens, who believes that “religion poisons everything. As well as a menace to civilization, it has become a threat to human survival.”¹⁵ Even Hans Küng, who theologizes from a Christian perspective, assumes a negative view of religion when he says that the “most fanatical and cruelest political struggles are those that have been colored, inspired, and legitimized by religion.”¹⁶ Religion plays an important role but, like others, is not the simple singular cause of violent extremism and terrorism. There are more religious people who are not violent extremists and many are liberal and pacifists. Being religious does not make one a violent extremist. Conversely, it does not necessarily follow that being non-religious or secular makes one a non-violent extremist. There are people who do not identify with any religion but are violent extremists.

Be it religion or ethnicity or political disenfranchisement, there is no single and linear cause and effect relation when it comes to the development of violent extremism. Yes, religion is critical contributor to the rise of violent extremism, but it is only one among other drivers, and violent extremism forms only when the right convergence of context, drivers, and circumstances happen at the right time. “Rarely is religion the principal cause of conflict,” argues David Smock, “even when the opposing groups, such as Protestants and Catholics in Northern Ireland, are differentiated by religious identities. But religion is nevertheless a contributing factor to conflict in places as widely scattered as Northern Ireland, the Middle East, the Balkans, Sudan, Indonesia, and Kashmir.”¹⁷

Though violent conflicts with religious motivation are not new, globalization provides a new context and a new framework for understanding the many and most recent expressions of religious conflicts. Not only has globalization accelerated the encounters of various religious believers, it has also generated tensions, reactions, and violent conflicts in which religion has played a crucial role. It is significant to note that as homogenizing and predatory globalization

¹⁵ Lori Underwood, “Religion and Terrorism,” in *The Root of All Evil: Religious Perspectives on Terrorism*, ed. Lori Underwood (New York: Peter Lang, 2013), 1.

¹⁶ Hans Küng, cited in David Smock, *Interfaith Dialogue and Peacebuilding* (United States Institute of Peace, 2002), 3.

¹⁷ Smock, *Interfaith Dialogue and Peacebuilding*, 3.

spreads, movements of various motivations—ethnic, religious, nationalistic, cultural—also rise.¹⁸ The erosion of religiously-based traditional worldview by modernist, secularist, market-driven worldview and values; the collusion of Western-educated global South leaders with foreign powers; and the massive violation of people's rights, have given birth to cynicism and other forms of antiglobalist sentiments. These are often supported by religious motivations, the most desperate and disastrous expression of which is terrorism—a terrorism intertwined with (and often responding to) the terrorism of the global market and imperial projects of some countries of the global north.¹⁹ More recently, religion has been associated with the vociferous rhetoric of patriotic and xenophobic political leaders and parties, ethnic cleansing, tribal wars, imperialistic-militaristic American exceptionalism, militant fundamentalism, and the devastating and vicious acts of terrorism and counter-terrorism.

Religious fundamentalism and militant extremism are not new social phenomena, and it is not the monopoly of one religion. Religious fundamentalism, which does not necessarily lead to militant extremism, is a reaction to perceived threats: its basic impulse is reactive. In essence, it is a reaction to what is perceived by adherents of a particular religious faith as a threat to their cherished worldview and values or core convictions. In the context of the US, the term fundamentalism is used to describe conservative Protestant Christians who have rejected the modernist-liberal trend of biblical hermeneutics and theological interpretation as well as the progressive agenda of many mainline Christian denominations. In recent years, however, the term fundamentalism has acquired a fatal twist: it has become closely linked to or is often identified with violent extremism and terrorism.

Let us take a closer look at this fundamentalism to understand it better and respond accordingly. Gabriel Almond, R. Scott Appleby,

¹⁸ David Lochhead, *Shifting Realities: Information Technology and the Church* (Geneva: WCC Publications, 1997), 100.

¹⁹ See Jon Berquist, ed., *Strike Terror No More: Theology, Ethics, and the New War* (St. Louis, MO: Chalice Press, 2002); Lee Griffith, *The War on Terrorism and the Terror of God* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 2002); Mark Juergensmeyer, *Terror in the Mind of God: The Global Rise of Religious Violence*, updated edition with a new preface (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000); Ulrich Duchrow and Franz Hinkelammert, *Property for People, Not for Profit: Alternatives to the Global Tyranny of Capital* (Geneva: WCC Publications, 2004), particularly pages 109–139.

and Emmanuel Sivan offer a more in-depth and comprehensive account of fundamentalism's markers. They identify nine characteristics of fundamentalism—five ideological and four organizational. The five ideological markers are reactivity to the marginalization of religion, selectivity, moral Manichaeism, absolutism and inerrancy, millennialism and messianism. The four organizational markers are elect (chosen membership), sharp boundaries, authoritarian organization, and behavioral requirements.²⁰

While I will not offer an in-depth examination of these markers, naming them provides a general sense of the nature of fundamentalism. Looking at the list of markers, it appears that no single marker can stand by itself. We find many of them present in various communities and organizations. Selective appropriations of tradition and sacred texts as well as engagement with modernity are present in various movements we do not normally label as fundamentalist. Further, an additive understanding of all these markers does not constitute fundamentalism. These markers do not constitute a simple checklist. What we call fundamentalism is constituted by the dynamic interaction of various markers, with some markers constituting the organizing center and others providing the energy. Fundamentalism is a functional system. Almond, Appleby, and Sivan name millennialism and messianism as powerful catalysts; selectivity as the way a community pares down the essentials in the face of the threats; and boundary as the way a community defines identity vis-à-vis the outsiders. The overall impulse of fundamentalism, however, is reactivity or reaction to perceived threats.²¹

The most dominant and pervasive form of fundamentalism is primarily a reaction to the perceived threats of modernity, particularly its secularizing thrust and its perceived attendant evils (individualism, sexual permissiveness, high rates of divorce, out-of-wedlock births, alcoholism, drugs, pornography, etc.). Whoever or whatever is the perceived bearer of secularization or responsible for diluting the purity of the faith is considered an enemy. A religious establishment may be identified as an enemy by fundamentalists if

²⁰ Gabriel Almond, R. Scott Appleby, and Emmanuel Sivan, *Strong Religion: The Rise of Fundamentalisms around the World* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2003), 92–98.

²¹ Almond, Appleby, and Sivan, *Strong Religion*, 99.

that religious establishment is perceived as “liberal.” Fundamentalism may be intertwined with cultural and ethno-nationalist components, in which case its reaction could be directed against another ethnic group. Another target of fundamentalists’ reaction is the secularizing state, particularly when a state supports such agendas as secular education, divorce, legalized abortion, gay marriages, and empowerment of women. Fundamentalist reaction to the state intensifies when leaders are perceived as corrupt and as corruptors of the minds of the people. Various forms of fundamentalism, contend Almond, Appleby, and Sivan, “share this family resemblance: across the board they identify three antagonists—the tepid or corrupt religious establishment, the secular state, and secularized civil society—as objects of sustained opposition by true believers.”²²

With fundamentalist groups seeing the world as a battlefield between good and evil, the surrounding environment as a threat to their purity, and various groups as enemies that must be stopped at whatever cost, fundamentalism can easily slide into the slippery slope of violent extremism. By no means is fundamentalism equivalent to violent extremism; there is no direct correlation between fundamentalism and violent extremism. Some fundamentalist groups would rather withdraw into seclusion. But when the right mixture of fundamentalist markers and context come into play, fundamentalism can find expression in violent extremism. Examples abound of fundamentalism providing the ideological motivation for violent extremism.

The resurgence of religion, after years of trying to banish it from the face of the earth, demonstrates the significance of religion in human society, either for good or for ill. Religion plays a positive role, which is why human communities continue to thirst for it. Even those who say they are spiritual but not religious are not, in my understanding, denying religion itself or religious sensibilities. It is not a wholesale rejection of religious sensibilities; rather, it is a response to a context in which organized religion has been identified, if not actively involved, in harming humanity and creation.

²² Almond, Appleby, and Sivan, *Strong Religion*, 101.

Paul Knitter has identified two vital, if not determinative, contributions that religions can offer to the building of our global civil society: vision and energy.²³ Primarily through symbols and narratives, religions offer their followers a vision of hope of a different world and a hope that the world they are currently in can be changed. This vision of a different world, along with the hope that another world is possible, is nourished and vitalized by the energy that religions instill in believers as they act on their conviction. And, when success is not visible on the immediate horizon or nonexistent, committed believers pursue and persevere even when stakes are high, such as threats to one's life, because of the empowering energy that religions provide to their followers.

Crucial, indeed, is the role of religion in society and, much more so, in times of global fragmentation. When the forces of predatory globalization crush communities, impoverish the populace, trample human dignity, push many into diaspora, distort priorities and values, commodify lives, destroy the ecosystem, leave families fragmented and alienated, drive the multitude into cynicism and despair, and consume the lives even of the winners, religion provides transcendent orientation and "antisystemic" force.²⁴ To be sure, religion can be easily co-opted by traditional and emerging political forces, such as what Mark Juergensmeyer calls "guerrilla antiglobalism," but the crucial point is to channel the vision and energies of the various religious communities for the creation of the global common good.²⁵

Globalization and its Discontents

There is a large body of writing that tries to relate predatory globalization to the rise of violent extremism. Again, this is not to be viewed in a simple one-way traffic, cause-effect relation, but predatory globalization provides the context or soil that is fertile for violent extremism to grow. Globalization is multidimensional, covering such aspects—to appropriate Arjun Appadurai's

²³ Paul Knitter, *One Earth, Many Religions: Multifaith Dialogue and Global Responsibility* (New York: Orbis Books, 1995), 71.

²⁴ Robert Schreiter, *The New Catholicity: Theology between the Global and the Local* (New York: Orbis Books, 1997), 16.

²⁵ Mark Juergensmeyer, "Religious Antiglobalism," in *Religion in Global Civil Society*, ed. Mark Juergensmeyer (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005), 135–48.

categories for mapping the complex and disjunctive order of the new global cultural economy—as technoscapes, financescapes, mediascapes, ideoscapes, and ethnoscapes.²⁶ I would like to add mediascapes as COVID-19 has reminded us; ecoscapes as we are being confronted with a serious ecological crisis; and religioscapes, especially as encounters among believers of various religions are becoming more common in localities that were once relatively homogenous. These dimensions play an important part in providing a context that fertilizes the soil for the growth of violent extremism, while also providing a context for the possibility of a global village for its citizens to thrive. I have alluded to some of these aspects, such as economics, finance, ideology, and religion. Others include the role of technology and media in the formation and spread of violent extremism.

The constant flow of information all over the world is a mixed blessing. Technology and media have played an important role in the spread of violent extremism and in the recruitment of terrorists. The idea that “[g]lobal jihadism is the product of a globalized world, particularly its media,” makes sense.²⁷ The media has given the jihadist the opportunity to achieve “symbolic recognition” in the absence of “real recognition.” When the image of the Twin Towers being blown up by two hijacked aircrafts was aired in major media outlets for months, it gave the actors the chance to achieve the fame that they had not received from the West, from their fellow Muslim believers, and the whole world. The exhibitionism of September 11, 2001 on the world television for months was a huge self-image booster for the long-humiliated victims who turned into triumphant conquerors capable of terrorizing the West.

While we can celebrate some of its achievements, globalization has also become a juggernaut: homogenizing culture, crushing and

²⁶ Arjun Appadurai, “Disjuncture and difference in the global Cultural Economy,” in *Global Culture: Nationalism, Globalization and Modernity*, ed. M. Featherstone (London: Sage, 1990), 295–310. Also cited by Anthony Richmond, *Global Apartheid: Refugees, Racism, and the New World Order* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994), 32–33; Roland Robertson, “Globalization and the Future of ‘traditional religion,’” in *God and Globalization: Religion and the Powers of the Common Life*, vol. 1, ed. Max Stackhouse with Peter Paris (Harrisburg: Trinity, 2000), 53–68. Robertson argues for the multi-dimensional aspect of globalization.

²⁷ Farhad Khosrokhavar, “The Psychology of the Global Jihadists,” in *The Fundamentalist Mindset: Psychological Perspectives on Religion, Violence, and History*, ed. Charles Strozier, et al. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010), 147.

marginalizing many, undermining traditional beliefs and community life, destructing the ecosystem, and spreading various forms of diseases. For the marginalized and crushed, globalization is not moving to the desired “global village” but “global pillage”; globalization is not a dream but a nightmare. Global pillage or global fragmentation is the underside to the marketed version of globalization. This is a view from those who have been victimized by globalization. The concern and perspective of the global South and marginalized communities start with this unfortunate reality of a globalized world that is fragmented economically, politically, and socially, which has serious repercussions in the field of religion.

It would be inaccurate, however, to confine one’s presentation of the global culture only in terms of homogenization or the globalized culture of escape or surrender to the inevitable. Globalization has generated “antiglobalist” movements of various sorts, ethnification, primitivism, and counter-hegemonic movements. “Antiglobalism” may take, according to Robert Schreiter, the form of either fundamentalism or revanchism. Whatever form it takes, its logic is retreat from the onslaught of globalization altogether.²⁸ It is significant to note that as homogenizing globalization spreads, movements of various motivations – ethnic, religious, nationalistic, cultural – also rise. The threat of monoculturalism brought by homogenizing globalization has led to the assertion of multiculturalism and multi-ethnic identities. “Universalism, both secular and religious,” says David Lockhead, “has encountered the rise of a stubborn particularism in the guise of resurgent nationalism.”²⁹

It may not be fully accurate that this phenomenon be totally attributed to predatory and homogenizing globalization. Nonetheless, one major reaction to the rapacious activities of predatory globalization that has drawn the attention of the world and has shaped geopolitics is the rise of fundamentalism and its linkage with international terrorism. As a short hand term that represents not just the economy but also the spread of Western project and modernity, globalization has surfaced in many fundamentalist militants’ rhetoric as a threat that must be stopped

²⁸ Robert J. Schreiter, *The New Catholicity: Theology Between the Global and the Local* (New York: Orbis Books, 1997), 21–25.

²⁹ David Lochhead, *Shifting Realities: Information Technology and the Church* (Geneva: WCC Publications, 1997), 100.

by all means and at all cost.

Counterterrorism

By its very name, counterterrorism is intended to respond to, eliminate, or end terrorism, but it may be working contrary to its intended outcome. It could be that, as Schirch suggested, “State-based responses to terrorism become part of the ecology of causes driving violent extremism.”³⁰ Several research projects have found a correlation or link between counterterrorism and an increase in terrorism. What has been purported as surgical strike is far from the truth, for many of these surgical strikes have done much collateral damage. Drone warfare, for example, has killed more civilians than terrorists, which then becomes an occasion for recruiting more terrorists. The collateral damage of the war on terror extends beyond the direct victims of drone or surgical strikes. Funding for education, health, and other services to support the poor and build resilient communities has been cut or sacrificed in favor of funding the war on terror, often without much transparency and public accountability. Moreover, as the war on terror intensifies, state governments that have joined this war have also drifted toward authoritarianism. And, in the name of security, the public has been willing to sacrifice civil liberties. This “solution” to a problem has larger repercussions to human security, thereby exacerbating the problem it is trying to address.

Framework, Drivers, and Convergences: Concluding Comments

My efforts have been to show that an effective way to study the growth of violent extremism is not to think of cause and effect, or single or multiple causes. It may not even be helpful to focus on multiple and multi-directional causes and effects. Rather, it is more helpful to consider the convergence and confluence of various factors and drivers, and their interactive dynamics. An ecological metaphor of living systems, as suggested earlier, is resonant in dealing with the emergence, growth, and spread of violent extremism.

With the complexity and multiple factors that are involved in understanding violent extremism, there is no single field of discipline that can fully explain or address the issue of violent

³⁰ Schirch, *The Ecology of Violent Extremism*, 15.

extremism, much more to help undo it. Addressing violent extremism requires the cooperation of various fields of discipline and various groups, including governmental agencies and private and civil society, both at the local and international level. Beyond dealing with symptoms of violent extremism, we must deal with deep structural factors that breed violent extremism, which means addressing the drivers. This tells us that a stable, economically productive, sustainable, healthy, equitable, peaceful, resilient, and participatory society is our strongest defense against the growth of violent extremism and terrorism.

Kwok Pui-lan's Postcolonial Feminist Method

M. Shawn Copeland

"Imperialism is not a slogan. It is real, it is palpable in content and form and its methods and effects. . . . Imperialism is total: it has economic, political, military, cultural and psychological consequences for the people of the world today."

Ngugi wa Thiong'o¹

"Where the words of women are crying to be heard, we must seek each of us to recognize our responsibility to seek those words out, to read them and examine them in their pertinence to our lives."

Audre Lorde²

"The colonist likes neither theory nor theorists."

Albert Memmi³

This essay calls attention to the theological method of Kwok Pui-lan. Born of Chinese parents, brought up and schooled in Hong Kong, trained in the tradition and texts of Anglo-Protestant Christian theology, deeply conversant with multiple articulations of theologies of liberation--Western feminist theologies in particular--and endowed with acute global consciousness, Kwok is an internationally recognized scholar. Possessed with a capacious and fearless intellect, she is a formidable, wide-ranging reader and skillful interpreter of texts and their contexts: one is likely to find in her work references to Karl Barth, David Hume, or Friedrich Schleiermacher; to Carol Christ, Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, or

¹ Ngugi wa Thiong'o, *Decolonizing the Mind: The Politics of Language in African Literature* (London: James Currey, 1986), 2.

² Audre Lorde, "The Transformation of Silence into Language and Action," in *Sister Outsider: Essays and Speeches* (Trumansburg, NY: Crossing Press, 1984), 43.

³ Albert Memmi, *The Colonizer and the Colonized*, trans. H. Greenfield (London: Earthscan Publications, 1990), 136.

Letty Russell; to Katie Geneva Cannon, Emilie Townes, or Musa Dube; to Michel Foucault, Jacques Derrida, or Marcella Althaus-Reid. On her own account, Kwok Pui-lan “borrows” from European texts “discriminately to debunk the totalizing discourse of the West, without indulging in their Eurocentric systems of thought.”⁴ She also selects, for example, African American or Indian or Latin American texts in order to engage these from within and through interrogation of her own (Asian) Chinese familial, cultural, and religiously-complex context, thereby, enacting a pluricultural dialogue.⁵ At the same time, she is acutely conscious of the “complexities and ambiguities” that feminist theologians must negotiate in efforts to understand and “appropriate” the work of other feminist theologians and the stories or myths or histories of their racial-ethnic cultural communities.⁶ Indeed, Kwok Pui-lan leads the vanguard of feminist theologians who utilize tools and insights provided by postcolonial theory and criticism; at the same time, she deploys strategies drawn from cultural studies and theory, intersectionality, and engagement with religious sensibilities and traditions beyond Christianity.

Three sections comprise this essay. The first section briefly sketches postcolonial criticism. The second examines “Discovering the Bible in the Non-Biblical World,”⁷ an article Kwok wrote for a special issue of *Semeia*. Here, her later formulation and performance of postcolonial theological method may be discerned *in embryo*; moreover, this article anticipates the eponymous volume that is her first important monograph. The third section considers her theological method as disclosed in *Postcolonial Imagination and Feminist Theology*.⁸ I focus on theological method for two reasons. First, method in theology has been a longstanding interest of mine; study of method may often disclose religious or moral, epistemological or metaphysical, philosophical or theoretical, cultural or political, commitments. Second, paying attention to

⁴ Kwok Pui-lan, *Discovering the Bible in the Non-Biblical World* (1995; Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock Publishers, 2003), 4.

⁵ Kwok, *Discovering the Bible in the Non-Biblical World*, 4.

⁶ Kwok Pui-lan, “Speaking from the Margins,” *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion* 8, no. 2 (Fall 1992): 102.

⁷ Kwok Pui-lan, “Discovering the Bible in the Non-Biblical World,” *Semeia* 47 (1989): 25–42.

⁸ Kwok Pui-lan, *Postcolonial Imagination and Feminist Theology* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2005).

method may uncover relevant exigencies and contingencies in articulating and living out a wholistic vision of liberation rooted in a search for justice, peace, reconciliation, and the integrity of creation.⁹

Postcolonial Criticism: "Thinking Otherwise"

Edward Said is widely acknowledged as founding colonial discourse theory with the publication of *Orientalism*.¹⁰ This work "directs attention to the discursive and textual production of colonial meanings and, concomitantly, to the consolidation of colonial hegemony."¹¹ Scholarly reception of *Orientalism* was both celebratory and contentious; nonetheless, it provided theoretically, "a set of categories" that colonized people could deploy and develop and through which they might understand themselves--"and [their] implication in the history of capitalist/European imperialism--differently."¹²

Over the past four decades, postcolonial studies has functioned, Leela Gandhi writes, "both as a meeting point and battle ground for a variety of disciplines and theories."¹³ Most fundamentally, at stake in the battle is control of life, identity, and meaning--cognitive, constitutive, communicative, and effective meaning. This struggle is neither abstruse nor gesture politics. As

⁹ For a fine examination of Kwok Pui-lan's method, see Joseph A. Marchal, "Imperial Intersections and Initial Inquiries: Toward a Feminist, Postcolonial Analysis of Philipppians," *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion* 22, no. 2 (2006): 5-32, especially 16-19.

¹⁰ Edward Said, *Orientalism* (New York: Random House, 1978).

¹¹ Leela Gandhi, *Postcolonial Theory: A Critical Introduction* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1998), 64-65. According to Gandhi, while Gayatri Spivak and Partha Chatterjee, among other scholars, celebrated the work's appearance, others such as Aijaz Ahmad and Raymond Williams leveled negative criticism. Gandhi offers this critique of *Orientalism*: "Said's project has been exemplary in its protest against the representational violence of colonial discourse and, indeed, in its commitment to the onerous task of consciousness raising in the Western academy. At the same time, *Orientalism* is often theoretically naïve in its insistence that the Orientalist stereotype invariably presupposes and confirms a totalising and unified imperialist discourse. . . . If *Orientalism* is a limited text, then, it is so primarily because it fails to accommodate the possibility of difference within Oriental discourse," 77, 79.

¹² Gandhi, *Postcolonial Theory: A Critical Introduction*, 74. See also Dipesh Chakrabarty, "Marx after Marxism: History, Subalterneity and Difference," *Meanjin*, 52, no. 3 (1993): 421-23.

¹³ Gandhi, *Postcolonial Theory: A Critical Introduction*, 3.

Ngugi wa Thiong'o asserts, "Imperialism is not a slogan. It is real. Imperialism is total." It is real and painfully real; its consequences daily and painfully disrupt and exhaust the very lives of most of the world's "darker" children, women, and men. Under contestation is the survival of whole peoples--their selves and identities, myths and histories, arts and languages, ideals and values, authority or governance and economies, ways of living and relating--their future existence. For imperialism not only continues to consign masses of peoples at the margins of flourishing through territorial, political, economic, and cultural domination, but it also continues to manipulate and obstruct meaning. Still, marginality may not always be a position of powerlessness and vulnerability hemmed in by physical and psychological violence. The poor, Gustavo Gutierrez insists, have power.¹⁴ Thus, the knowledge and practices of subaltern or subjugated or colonized (or oppressed) peoples may prove transformative. To this end, R. S. Sugirtharajah argues, postcolonial criticism signifies

a reactive resistance discourse of the colonized who critically interrogate dominant knowledge systems in order to recover the past from the Western slander and misinformation of the colonial period, and who continue to interrogate neo-colonizing tendencies after the declaration of independence.¹⁵

Postcolonial criticism, then, coalesces as a set of practices that enables the colonized (marginalized/oppressed), those formerly conscripted into empires, to see them/ourselves and to relinquish binary thinking—that reductive duality that yields “everyone to an undifferentiated entity.”¹⁶ As a set of practices, postcolonial criticism calls for “thinking otherwise,”¹⁷ that is, thinking that affirms dishonored embodiment, dishonored flesh. Such thinking, Homi Bhabha writes, “intervenes in those ideological discourses of modernity that attempt to give a hegemonic ‘normality’ to the

¹⁴ Gustavo Gutierrez, *The Power of the Poor in History* (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1993).

¹⁵ R. S. Sugirtharajah, *Postcolonial Criticism and Biblical Interpretation* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), 13.

¹⁶ Sugirtharajah, *Postcolonial Criticism and Biblical Interpretation*, 39.

¹⁷ Gandhi also uses this term to describe postcolonial criticism, but I am thinking of its usage in Ashon Crawley, *Blackpentecostal Breath: The Aesthetics of Possibility* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2017).

uneven development and the differential, often disadvantaged histories of nations, races communities, peoples."¹⁸

Postcolonial criticism interrupts putatively "normative" colonial depictions of the world, constructions of the "other," the "native" so in need of Christianity and civilization. Moreover, colonialism's discursive formations are systems of power that (de)form and restrict, (re)arrange and (re)order fields of experience, understanding, judging, deciding, and acting.

Beginning to Think Otherwise: A Trajectory

Kwok Pui-lan's mature theological method as disclosed in *Postcolonial Imagination and Feminist Theology* suggests a moving point of view prompted by questioning that (1) requires naming and critiquing her own social location or position from which she theologizes; (2) interrogates the inner logics of those multi-faceted religious, cultural, social (i.e., political, economic, technological) contexts that form and deform the women (and men) who live within these contexts; and (3) seeks self-liberation from oppressive, hierarchical models of truth (i.e., decolonizing the mind). I propose that her article, "Discovering the Bible in the Non-Biblical World," sets the stage for the unfolding of Kwok's later postcolonial feminist theological method.

In "Discovering the Bible in the Non-Biblical World,"¹⁹ Kwok declares, "The central *Problematik* of biblical hermeneutics for Christians living in the 'non-Christian' world is how to hear God's speaking in a different voice--one other than Hebrew, Greek, German, or English."²⁰ For Kwok, this is not a matter of literary translation merely. Rather, Chinese reception of the Bible was hindered by exploitation and oppression in the "two-thirds" world. Too often, too easily, too cavalierly, the Bible has been manipulated in the service of domination, even though that same Bible may serve

¹⁸ Homi Bhabha, *The Location of Culture* (1994; London and New York: Routledge, 2004), 245, Kindle. Bhabha concludes this paragraph by "bending" Jürgen Habermas to his purpose: "the postcolonial project, at the most general theoretical level" concerns collapse or breakdown or "loss of meaning conditions of anomie," 245-46. Here Bhabha is quoting Jürgen Habermas, *The Philosophical Discourse of Modernity: Twelve Lectures*, trans. Frederick G. Lawrence (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1987), 348.

¹⁹ Kwok, "Discovering the Bible in the Non-Biblical World," 25. This article is a predecessor of the book by the same name published in 1995.

²⁰ Kwok, "Discovering the Bible in the Non-Biblical World," 25.

the impulse and cause of liberation. Further, she argues, "Biblical interpretation is never simply a religious matter, for the processes of formation, canonization and transmission of the Bible have been imbued with the issues of authority and power."²¹

Kwok probes implications of these issues--power and authority--in biblical interpretation through analysis of power dynamics and generating the notion of dialogical imagination. To interrogate the former, she draws judiciously on Michel Foucault's notion of a society's construction and manipulation of "regimes of truth" or "general politics of truth."²² Analysis of power prompts her inquiry: "Who owns the truth? Who interprets the truth? What constitutes truth?" Many Chinese and other Asian Christians "reject the assumption that the Bible contains all the truth;" they would make room for the power of the Spirit of the God of Jesus to have inspired moral sages and teachers such as Confucius, Mencius, and Mozi along with many Chinese classics such as the Analects.²³ Kwok argues,

The politics of truth is not fought on the epistemological level . . . The Chinese philosophical tradition . . . is not primarily interested in metaphysical and epistemological questions. . . . It is more concerned with the moral and ethical visions of a good society. The Neo-Confucian tradition in particular has emphasized the integral relationship between knowing and doing. Truth is not merely something to be grasped cognitively, but to be practiced and acted out in the self-cultivation of moral beings.²⁴

Chinese, Asian peoples, and other peoples of the so-called "two-thirds world" will decide for themselves the truth, meaningfulness, and value of the Bible by attending to and judging the behavior and actions of the Christian community.

In search of an affectively sensitive and creative hermeneutics proper to Asian contexts, Kwok coins the term *dialogical imagination*. This term grows from reflection on observations of what Asian theologians are doing (or not) when they do theology (method). The

²¹ Kwok, "Discovering the Bible in the Non-Biblical World," 26.

²² Michel Foucault, *Power Knowledge: Selected interviews and Other Writings, 1972-1977*, ed. Colin Gordon (New York: Pantheon, 1980), 131.

²³ Kwok, "Discovering the Bible in the Non-Biblical World," 28.

²⁴ Kwok, "Discovering the Bible in the Non-Biblical World," 30, 29.

term “dialogical” emphasizes “mutuality, active listening, and openness to what the other has to say.” Moreover, since Asian Christians are heirs to both the biblical story and to their own stories as Asian people, these two must be brought into dialogue; further, different religious and cultural traditions must be involved in this “constant conversation.”²⁵ Dialogical imagination also calls for the “radical appropriation” not only of Asian myths, legends, and stories, but also of the “social biographies” or histories of various Asian peoples. In this process, Asian theologians may begin to “discern the signs of the times and of God’s redeeming action in that history . . . [so] filled with theological insight.”²⁶ This creative hermeneutic framework seeks to reimagine the biblical context, “critically judging the text and the experience underlying it,”²⁷ and aims to reconsider both the Bible and Asian realities “to challenge the established ‘order of things.’”²⁸

Finally, and quite importantly for feminist theological projects as an interpretative framework, dialogical imagination involves analysis of gender, of women’s positioning in relation to a given people’s myths and legends and stories, their cultural and religious traditions, their social biography or history. This analysis equips theologians to disentangle and to clarify what affirms women’s lives and possibilities in Asian peoples’ religious and cultural traditions, their reception and use of the Bible, their cultural myths and legends and stories, and their social biographies or histories. “The interactions among colonialism, gender, and religion continue some of the most significant and contradictory forces in influencing our world today.”²⁹

Method in Postcolonial Feminist Theology

Kwok’s concern for adequate, respectful, even edifying, biblical interpretation in a differentiated and complex Asian world led her to focus on Foucauldian discourse analysis of power and to generate the creative framework of dialogical imagination to address experiences and questions arising in that world. In doing

²⁵ Kwok, “Discovering the Bible in the Non-Biblical World,” 31.

²⁶ Kwok, “Discovering the Bible in the Non-Biblical World,” 31–33.

²⁷ Kwok, “Discovering the Bible in the Non-Biblical World,” 31–33.

²⁸ Kwok, “Discovering the Bible in the Non-Biblical World,” 31.

²⁹ Laura E. Donaldson and Kwok Pui-lan, eds., *Postcolonialism, Feminism, and Religious Discourse* (New York and London: Routledge, 2002), 1.

postcolonial feminist theology, she prescribes neither recipe nor “rules to be followed blindly,”³⁰ but rather an open-ended, dynamic, differentiating interpretative framework.

This methodological seriousness and creativity invests postcolonial feminist theology with the three-fold task of “resignifying gender, requeering sexuality, and redoing theology.”³¹ In proposing *resignification of gender*, Kwok calls feminist theologians, in particular white feminist theologians, to a new, critical, and complexified respect for difference; to recognize and respect the multiple subject positions that difference allows human persons to inhabit; and to acknowledge that “our identity is rendered by the others it creates.”³² Such respect, recognition, and acknowledgement means that feminist theology must position its analysis as always open and open always to “others,” to “the stranger,” to whomever is “unintelligible” in a given cultural, religious, socio-political context.³³ Moreover, resignifying gender steers clear of mono-categorical and monocausal analysis; rather postcolonial feminist theology argues for a “paradigm of historically and culturally specific ‘common differences’ as a basis for social analysis and solidarity, because the local and global exist simultaneously and mutually constitute each other.”³⁴ Such a

³⁰ Bernard Lonergan, *Method in Theology* (New York: Herder and Herder, 1972), xii.

³¹ Kwok, *Postcolonial Imagination and Feminist Theology*, 128–37.

³² Kwok, *Postcolonial Imagination and Feminist Theology*, 132. Kwok is critically appreciative of the ground-clearing work of feminist theologians Mary McClintock Fulkerson, *Changing the Subject: Women’s Discourses and Feminist Theology* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1994) and “*Theologia* as a Liberation Habitus: Thoughts toward Christian Formation for Resistance,” in *Theology and the Problem of Difference: Essays in Honor of Edward Farley*, ed. Robert R. Williams (Valley Forge, PA: Trinity Press International, 1995), 99–127; and Ellen T. Armour, *Deconstruction, Feminist Theology, and the Problem of Difference: Subverting the Race/Gender/Divide* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999). At the same time, she expresses dissatisfaction with Fulkerson’s lack of robust attention to the dynamics of race and omission of an international framework through which to examine the position of women in the US vis-à-vis that of women in other parts of the world. Kwok approves of Armour’s critical attention to race, but finds the lack of engagement with postcolonial or queer theory and the preoccupation with discourse and texts off-putting (132–36).

³³ Kwok, *Postcolonial Imagination and Feminist Theology*, 132. Similar regard for “the other person(s)” is expressed in my “Turning Theology: A Proposal,” *Theological Studies* 80, no. 4 (December 2019): 753–73.

³⁴ Chandra Talpade Mohanty, *Feminism without Borders: Decolonizing Theory, Practicing Solidarity* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2003), 244. See also, M.

theological project resists any form of “essentialized gender binarism.” It asks, “What sort of female gendered bodies and subjects are produced by the globalization process in the households, workplaces, churches, academy or military?”³⁵

“Given white queer theologians’ propensity to separate sexual oppression from the broader network of power relations,” Kwok charges postcolonial feminist theology to engage in *requering sexuality*.³⁶ On her account, this project demands the construction of a “new genealogy of morals.” This means “tracing the origin and development of moral teachings about sexuality and their religious justification in the wider framework of the cultivation of the bourgeois self and national and international politics.”³⁷ Kwok advocates a complex genealogy of morals (framework) that would advance simultaneous analyses through multiple lenses. Such “thick” analyses not only would track and describe “continuity and discontinuity of the colonialist, racist, masculinist, heterosexual regimes of power, but would also need to signal possibilities of inversion, subversion, and displacement of these regulatory practices.”³⁸ Adequate theological treatments of sexuality, Kwok observes, remain a “crying” need in the global South.³⁹

The third task of postcolonial feminist theology calls for *redoing theology*.⁴⁰ This redoing calls for a “reconceptualize[ation] of the relation of theology and empire through the multiple lenses of gender, race, class, sexuality, religion, and so forth.”⁴¹ The breadth and depth of this analysis requires intellects, energies, and collaborations of feminist theologians from every sector of the

Jacqui Alexander and Chandra Talpade Mohanty, eds. *Feminist Genealogies, Colonial Legacies, Democratic Futures* (New York: Routledge, 1997).

³⁵ Kwok, *Postcolonial Imagination and Feminist Theology*, 136.

³⁶ Kwok, *Postcolonial Imagination and Feminist Theology*, 142.

³⁷ Kwok, *Postcolonial Imagination and Feminist Theology*, 142.

³⁸ Kwok, *Postcolonial Imagination and Feminist Theology*, 143. Kwok finds Judith Butler’s *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (New York: Routledge, 1990) “insightful”; at the same time, she expresses disappointment at the lack of attention to North American racism in the theology of Marcella Althaus-Reid, *Indecent Theology: Theological Perversions in Sex, Gender and Politics* (New York: Routledge, 2000).

³⁹ Kwok, *Postcolonial Imagination and Feminist Theology*, 144.

⁴⁰ Kwok, *Postcolonial Imagination and Feminist Theology*, 144. Such a redoing must expose theology’s centuries-long involvement in misogyny and brutality, in colonial exploration and expropriation, in enslavement and erotic violence.

⁴¹ Kwok, *Postcolonial Imagination and Feminist Theology*, 144.

empire's neo-liberal capitalist domain. Kwok adds three items to the agenda of postcolonial feminist theology: tracing and analyzing the circulation of theological symbols in their migration from colonial center to periphery; reconceptualizing religious differences; and environmental degradation.⁴²

Imagination throbs at the heart of redoing theology. In the article on biblical interpretation in a non-biblical world, Kwok outlines the basic features of dialogical imagination. In *Postcolonial Imagination and Feminist Theology*, through self-conscious discernment and reflection on her own mental (intellectual) operations, she describes postcolonial imagination as three non-linear, overlapping, and interwoven movements. Further, she depicts these movements as more "like motifs in a sonata, sometimes recurrent, sometimes disjointed, with one motif dominating at one moment, and another resurfacing at another point."⁴³ She names these movements as historical, dialogical, and diasporic.

The *historical imagination* cultivates regard and respect for the dead, nurtures the "hunger of memory." Kwok reminds us that the very presence, scent, and memory of women have been excised from malestream written history. How are women who were "multiply marginalized, shuttled between tradition and modernity, and mostly illiterate" found, restored to the status of historical subjects?⁴⁴ The absence and lack of texts, of women's writing, is compounded by the realization that "the memory of multiply oppressed women is inscribed on the body, on one's most private self, on one's sexuality."⁴⁵ Grief and loss, silences and gaps are disconcerting, but "historical imagination aims not only to reconstitute the past, but also to release the past so that the present is livable."⁴⁶ Absence and lack conjure an "historical imagination of the concrete . . . a hope more practical . . . a trust born out of necessity and well-worn wisdom."⁴⁷

In *Postcolonial Imagination and Feminist Theology*, Kwok critiques and rethinks the earlier outline of *dialogical imagination*. Given the increasing and deepening complexities of the global geo-

⁴² Kwok, *Postcolonial Imagination and Feminist Theology*, 144–45.

⁴³ Kwok, *Postcolonial Imagination and Feminist Theology*, 30–31.

⁴⁴ Kwok, *Postcolonial Imagination and Feminist Theology*, 31.

⁴⁵ Kwok, *Postcolonial Imagination and Feminist Theology*, 31.

⁴⁶ Kwok, *Postcolonial Imagination and Feminist Theology*, 37.

⁴⁷ Kwok, *Postcolonial Imagination and Feminist Theology*, 37.

political situation and “the impact of global capitalism on cultural formation in general and on theology in particular,” rather than simply abandon dialogical imagination, Kwok takes stock of its limitations. Despite the use of terms such as “pluriphonic” or “multivocal” as ways of inviting “others” to conversation and dialogue, all voices at the table are never equal.⁴⁸ Moreover, “the tension and anxieties elicited by cultural difference are always overlaid and heightened by the issues of race, class, gender, and sexuality.”⁴⁹ Dialogical imagination has to remain alert to “the fluidity and contingent character of Asian cultures, which are undergoing rapid and multidimensional changes.”⁵⁰

Diasporic consciousness is the source of *diasporic imagination*. There is not just one, but multiple and diverse diasporas. Diaspora “is as much a material condition . . . as it is a process of sociality that threads sentiments of belonging into a kind of known world.”⁵¹ On the other hand, the notion of diaspora may be invoked in such a way as to conceal or deflect differences and discontinuities. Indeed, the very “concept of diaspora has been extracted from peoples’ lived experiences then molded into metaphors for alienation, outsidership, home, and various binary relationships,”⁵² such as native/settler, stranger/resident, citizen/alien. Moreover, diasporic imagination locates “similarities and difference” in the familiar and in the unexpected.⁵³ From within the movement of diasporic imagination, Kwok aims “to conjure a female diasporic subject as multiply located, always doubly displaced, and having to negotiate an ambivalent past, while holding on to fragments of memories, cultures, and histories in order to dream a different future.”⁵⁴

Kwok Pui-lan’s deployment of postcolonial criticism in theology holds out the possibility of thinking our way through and out of the historical imbalances and disruptions, cognitive subversions, affective repressions, political breakdowns, economic

⁴⁸ Kwok, *Postcolonial Imagination and Feminist Theology*, 42.

⁴⁹ Kwok, *Postcolonial Imagination and Feminist Theology*, 43.

⁵⁰ Kwok, *Postcolonial Imagination and Feminist Theology*, 43.

⁵¹ Ivy G. Wilson and Ayo A. Coly, “Black is the Color of the Cosmos or *Callaloo* and the Cultures of the Diaspora Now,” *Callaloo* 30, no. 2 (2007): 417.

⁵² Tiffany Patterson and Robin D. G. Kelley, “Unfinished Migrations: Reflections on the African Diaspora and the Making of the Modern World,” *African Studies Review* 43, no. 1 (April 2000): 20.

⁵³ Kwok, *Postcolonial Imagination and Feminist Theology*, 50.

⁵⁴ Kwok, *Postcolonial Imagination and Feminist Theology*, 46.

exploitations, cultural disintegrations, and religious reductions produced, augmented, and aggravated by colonial encounter.⁵⁵ Kwok Pui-lan conjures postcolonial feminist theology as transdisciplinary discourse in the service of radical interrogation of doctrines and orthodoxies, liturgies and rituals, presuppositions and practices that stifle the flourishing of life and of hope.

Conclusion

Kwok Pui-lan first studied theology during a period of intense political and intellectual ferment in her homeland, Hong Kong. In the introduction to the recent collection, *The Hong Kong Protests and Political Theology*, she tells us that the current struggle in Hong Kong evokes memories of student activism during her own student days in the late 1960s and 1970s.⁵⁶ In the midst of completing her doctoral dissertation, she wrote a short piece for the *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion* in which she claimed for Hong Kong, for Asian Christian women, and therefore, for herself—"a boundary existence."⁵⁷

A boundary functions to limit, to partition; it demarcates and marks edges and margins. Kwok contends that Hong Kong derives its vitality from its existence "on the boundary of China, to be in and out of the system, so that she can continue to interact dynamically with the center, to pose new challenges, and to perform the role of a 'creative minority.'"⁵⁸

Kwok Pui-lan too moves in and out, walks and crosses boundaries. She claims her multiple identities, engages and interacts with multiple and varied differentiated religious, academic, social, political, cultural realms. She thinks and imagines with rigor and compassion, formulates and offers creative critiques from the boundary for the sake of transforming boundaries positively. Although Kwok Pui-lan eschews the "well-established" church and academy, for the demands of solidarity, she is willing to be both in

⁵⁵ Gandhi, *Postcolonial Theory: A Critical Introduction*, 176.

⁵⁶ Kwok, "Introduction," in *The Hong Kong Protests and Political Theology*, eds. Kwok Pui-lan and Francis Ching-wah Yip (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 2021), 1-2, Kindle. "In the 1970s, students protested a colonial government that was corrupt and oppressive. In 2019, the target was the Hong Kong government, which protestors saw as following the marching orders of China's leaders rather than listening to Hong Kong's people."

⁵⁷ Kwok Pui-lan, "Claiming a Boundary Existence: A Parable from Hong Kong," *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion* 3, no. 2 (Fall 1987): 122.

⁵⁸ Kwok, "Claiming a Boundary Existence," 122.

and out of the system, even as she resists comfortable accommodation to the system. Humble self-critique holds her at the margins of liberating traditions, sustaining her boundary existence.⁵⁹ Kwok Pui-lan's method of postcolonial criticism, her postcolonial feminist theology, offers us an "ethical paradigm for a systematic critique"⁶⁰ of global suffering and anguish.

⁵⁹ Kwok, "Claiming a Boundary Existence," 122.

⁶⁰ Gandhi, *Postcolonial Theory: A Critical Introduction*, 176.

“A Look at New Worlds”:
*The Japanese American Astronaut and Asian American
Transcendence*

Rudy V. Busto and Jane Naomi Iwamura

The last page of every US passport now displays an inspirational quote from Ellison Shoji Onizuka: "Every generation has the obligation to free men's minds for a look at new worlds . . . to look out from a higher plateau than the last generation."¹ The first Asian American to go into outer space, Onizuka was one of seven crew members aboard the ill-fated Space Shuttle *Challenger*.² Exploding 73 seconds after launch on 28 January 1986, the *Challenger* disaster marked a significant moment in the eventual demise of the Space Shuttle project. Along with the passport quote, Onizuka's memory is preserved in the Onizuka Airforce Station in Sunnyvale, California; the renaming of his hometown airport in Keāhole, Hawaii; a street name in Los Angeles' Little Tokyo; and even an asteroid, to name a few examples. Most Americans, however, probably know his name emblazoned on a shuttlecraft in four episodes of *Star Trek: The Next Generation (ST:TNG)* between 1989 and 1992.³

Despite Onizuka's ongoing legacy, especially in a popular science fiction space opera series, he does not rise to the level of everyday consciousness. Yet, all US citizens who travel beyond the nation state now carry with them his exhortation to "look at new worlds." This chapter takes up Ellison Onizuka's call literally and

¹ We would like to thank José A. Rios for his research assistance.

² Onizuka was not the first astronaut of Asian descent, Phạm Tuấn of Vietnam spent 8 days aboard the Soviet Salyut-6 space station in 1980, <https://www.nasa.gov/feature/space-station-20-asian-american-pacific-islander-heritage-month/>.

³ *Memory Alpha*, s.v. "Onizuka," <https://memory-alpha.fandom.com/wiki/Onizuka>.

figuratively, where the “higher plateau” refers to Asian Americans as spacefarers in pursuit of transcendence. In our exploration of the Japanese American astronaut, we take up Kwok Pui-lan’s challenge for the study of religion to move beyond its comfortable horizons. She calls for “broadening our scope and updating our subject matter” as crucial; that “the articulation and the embodying of the new must also be refreshing.” And so, this essay answers Kwok’s push for scholars of religion to “think outside the box, color outside the lines, and say it well, with guts!”⁴ Similar to the Asian American astronaut, the religious studies scholar or theologian is always/already tied to the particularities of Asian American existence, their histories and bodies, yet is compelled to envision and express the limits of (religious) imagination. How can Asian American scholars of religion within the bounds of empire and (post)colonial existence “catch up with the world” by thinking about what is “off” world? This chapter considers how the Asian American astronaut, real and imagined, suggests new ways of thinking and theorizing about “religion,” “theology,” and the divisions that define our fields of study. As constructed humans, how might Asian Americans reach forms of transcendence, described by Douglas Cowan as the surpassing of physical limits, new forms of societies, cultures and species, and even the experience and conceptualization of what is ultimate?⁵

The American Astronaut

To appreciate and understand the contours of this call, it is useful to fully venture into Onizuka’s world and the extensive discourse of the Asian American astronaut. The possibility of human beings traveling beyond the solar system moves closer to reality as advances in astrophysics and global efforts at space exploration are revived by governments and private business. The goals and purposes of human space travel are old earthly aspirations common to the point of collective assumptions shared by global civilizations:

⁴ Kwok Pui-lan, “Transmodern, Transnational, Transdisciplinary, Trans . . . ,” *Spotlight on Teaching, American Academy of Religion* 22, no. 4 (October 2007): viii.

⁵ Douglas E. Cowan, *Sacred Space: The Quest for Transcendence in Science Fiction Film and Television* (Waco: Baylor University Press, 2010), 11-19; “Douglas Cowan Interview Part 1: Forthcoming Book ‘Sacred Space,’” *Theofantastique*, September 10, 2009, <https://www.theofantastique.com/2009/09/10/douglas-cowan-interview-part-1-forthcoming-book-sacred-space/>.

curiosity, exploration, colonization, profit. Speculation about human space travel and what we may encounter there is the stuff of both hard science and science fiction speculation.

The modern history of actual space travel, beginning in the 1950s, occurred within the context of the US-Soviet Union cold war. The “space race” served as the off-planet competition between the simple binary: democracy vs. communism. What was done on earth got rehearsed in the heavens, driven by political ideology with a great deal of support by science fiction. Such is the interweaving of reality with science fiction that the reimagining of a Space Force warfare service branch by the US government in 2020 was mocked for its logo bearing “an uncanny likeness to the insignia from the cult sci-fi TV series” Star Trek, and that Ronald Reagan’s 80s Strategic Defense Initiative was dubbed “Star Wars.”⁶

In 2018, billionaire entrepreneur and showman Elon Musk sent his personal red Tesla Roadster convertible, “driven” by a mannequin astronaut, into orbit around the sun as a stunt to promote his company SpaceX and as a clever, “silly” prelude to his larger vision to colonize Mars. Musk dubbed his astronaut “Starman” after David Bowie’s 1972 song of the same name. Starman travels around the sun every 557 days with the top down, his right hand responsibly on the steering wheel, his left elbow jauntily posed resting on the open driver’s window. He will drive his cherry red vehicle “for the next few million years,” barring any mishaps with other heavenly objects.⁷ Musk dressed Starman in a SpaceX company pressure suit specifically designed to connect with “the Hollywood tradition of the idealized human warrior body,” including “exaggerated shoulders, and a carapace of articulated musculature.” His vision of the twenty-first century space explorer broke with the previous “classic” suit design he thought was an “awkward reminder of tiny individuals adrift in an environment where they clearly don’t belong, as represented by the inflated

⁶ “U.S. Space Force logo looks like one from Star Trek,” *BBC News*, January 24, 2020, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-us-canada-51245262>.

⁷ Nathaniel Lee and Rebecca Wilton, “Elon Musk Sent a 100K Tesla Roadster to Space a Year Ago. It Has Now Traveled Farther Than Any Other Car in History,” *Business Insider*, March 1, 2019, <https://www.businessinsider.com/elon-musk-tesla-roadster-space-spacex-orbit-2019-2#:~:text=It%20completes%20one%20full%20orbit,the%20next%20few%20million%20years.>

Michelin Man.” In fact, Musk chose a designer who had worked on several superhero movies, nudging him with the goal “to have the astronauts put the suit on and ‘look better than they did without it, like a tux.’”⁸ The spacesuit’s helmet hides the astronaut’s flesh, as is appropriate.

Musk’s last published photograph of Starman shows him eternally frozen in his cruising vogue, the helmet’s dark protective visor mirrors and reflects back US cultural norms of stylish, exaggerated masculinity. Until recently, we have been conditioned to visualize astronauts as white men, so the assumption that Starman is white is a tangible metaphor of white masculinity and “transcendent power of scientific ingenuity and technological know-how,” or what Susan Jeffords refers to as the “hardbody of masculinity.” It is ironic that Starman—male by inference—is all technology, with the space suit and helmet broadcasting “the triumph of technology over living organisms.”⁹

The history of space travel reiterates North Atlantic empire and conquest, replayed and reimagined in speculative fiction and film about humans traveling to, through, and beyond the galaxy. The trope of space as a “frontier” to be conquered and even colonized, encapsulated within the protective veneer of adventure and exploration, accompanies the presumption that these ventures are the prerogative of rugged sky pilots, heroic white male space heroes. Starman is the culmination of astronaut evolution, and even though we cannot see his face, we know what he looks like. Space historian Rod Pyle finds Elon Musk’s launch of Starman as initiating a new and exciting era of galactic exploration: “Space 2.0.” “We are now in a far better position,” Pyle writes in 2019, “to embark upon a sustainable program of human spaceflight and space development, and toward a permanent, robust human presence off earth.”¹⁰ The

⁸ Vanessa Friedman, “Elon Musk’s SpaceX Suit Is Like a Tuxedo for the Starship Enterprise,” *New York Times*, May 27, 2020, <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/05/27/fashion/SpaceX-Dragon-Suits.html>.

⁹ Susan Jeffords, *Hard Bodies: Hollywood Masculinity in the Reagan Era* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1994), and Marina Benjamin, *Rocket Dreams: How the Space Age Shaped Our Vision of a World Beyond* (New York: Free Press, 2003), 30–36, quoted in Launius, “Heroes in a Vacuum: The Apollo Astronaut as Cultural Icon,” *The Florida Historical Quarterly* 87, no. 2 (Fall 2008): 203, 204.

¹⁰ Rod Pyle, *Space 2.0: How Private Spaceflight, a Resurgent NASA, and International Partners Are Creating a New Space Age* (Dallas: BenBella Books, 2019), 260–61, 13.

traditional trope of the astronaut and space exploration is renewed and revised for a new generation.

In order for Ellison Onizuka, the first Asian American in space, Sally Ride, the first American woman in space, and Christa McAuliffe, the first American “civilian” in space, to happen, NASA had to overcome numerous technical, political, funding, and public relations obstacles. By the time Ellison Onizuka submitted his application to NASA in 1977, the agency had turned away from manned moon flights, focusing instead on building an orbiting space station assisted by reusable winged orbiter shuttles between earth and the space station. NASA’s publicity of the space station program touted its possible benefits, including solar-generated electricity, telecommunications, unspecified “industrial uses of space [that] could create nearly two million [jobs] by 2010 . . . and an increase of hundreds of billions of dollars in the gross national product.” On the public use side, NASA imagined space tourism:

[A] NASA consultant sees a 100-room hotel with rates—presumably not for the average family vacation—starting at \$5000 for the round trip and a few days in orbit. And of permanent settlements in space Mankind will achieve in the next 100 years the most significant accomplishment yet: true Earth independent, self-support systems which will lead to the establishment of a multitude of new, different, and enterprising civilizations.¹¹

The space program consciously created the astronaut as a rugged, masculine explorer. From his earliest version in the Project Mercury program of the late 1950s, the American astronaut initially embodied Cold War heroic values. “The astronauts put a very human face on the grandest technological endeavor in history and the myth of the virtuous, no-nonsense, able, and professional astronaut was born,” wrote NASA historian Roger Launius about NASA’s publicity of Project Mercury astronauts. “The Mercury Seven were, in essence, each of us,” NASA put forward, “None were either aristocratic in bearing or elitist in sentiment. They came from everywhere in the nation.” Except, of course the astronauts of 1959 were not really “each of us” but icons of nationalist propaganda. Launius’ review of the American astronaut as cultural icon,

¹¹ Howard Allaway, *The Space Shuttle at Work* (SP-432/EP-156), (Washington DC: NASA/History Office, 1979), 33, 68–72.

however, recognizes “an expansive diversity” of the astronaut corps that occurred by the end of the twentieth century. But even so, he suggests that the power of the icon—as male and white—merely subsumed women and minorities into its own mythology: “a construction of its members as emissaries of the whole population” even as the space suit they wear emphasizes “the difference of the astronauts from ordinary Americans.”¹² This assimilation strategy invites difference but hides it under the anonymity of technology, confirming the “triumph of technology over living organisms” while shielding the impact of race and gender insurgencies even as NASA celebrates its expansive diversity. Regardless of diversity—in plain sight or hidden—the icon persists to instantiate any and all astronauts as nationalist propaganda. Hence, the irony that Starman, a mannequin inside a pressure suit (why not just the pressure suit filled with styrofoam peanuts?) launched by private enterprise, embodies precisely the concept of the astronaut as heroic yet exemplary of the American male character, as “ordinary supermen.”¹³ The astronaut floats beyond NASA but remains securely tethered to the nation’s mythos.

The Making of the Japanese American Astronaut

Ellison Onizuka’s place in the national memory of the *Challenger* disaster differs from that of the other crew members because he was Japanese American. His death triggered a reaction in American Civil religion that celebrated multicultural unity even as it promoted assimilation. Onizuka’s tragic heroism on behalf of the nation reverberated with and condensed Japanese American history in a single spectacular, explosive, and public moment. The *Challenger* tragedy occurred at the height of the Japanese American reparations movement, between the release and recommendations of the US government’s Commission on Wartime Relocation and Internment of Civilians (CWRIC) in 1983, and the signing of the 1988 Civil Liberties Act that acknowledged the “grave injustice” of the internment. The US government apologized for the internment of 110,000 Japanese Americans, and gave a symbolic monetary payment to the internees, evacuees, and persons of Japanese

¹² Launius, “Heroes in a Vacuum,” 191, 209.

¹³ J. Kaufmann, “NASA’s PR Campaign on Behalf of Manned Space Flight, 1961-1963,” *Public Relations Review* 17, no. 1 (1997), 64.

ancestry who lost liberty or property because of discriminatory action by the Federal government during World War II.¹⁴

In 1978, Onizuka was a member of the “35 New Guys,” the first group of astronauts accepted by NASA since 1969. The previous class, the last in the Apollo era, numbered seven white males, a sharp contrast to this new group. For despite its moniker, these “New Guys” included six women, including Sally Ride, who would be the first American woman in space, and Judith Resnick, who would accompany Onizuka onto the *Challenger* 15 years later.¹⁵ Onizuka’s candidacy out of nearly 8,000 candidates and 220 interviewees had largely to do with satisfying two criteria: experienced pilots capable of learning to fly the shuttle orbiter, and specialists with a science or engineering background with hands-on experience. Onizuka was a perfect fit. He had earned a master’s degree in aerospace engineering from the University of Colorado, Boulder in December 1969, and a month later, entered active duty in the US Air force as a commissioned second lieutenant. He spent four years at California’s McClellan Air Force Base, then moved on to Edwards Air Force Base in the Mojave Desert, where after completing training, he was assigned as a test flight engineer and instructor until he was accepted into NASA’s astronaut training program. Onizuka trained for NASA’s shuttle orbiter, taking his first mission flight in January 1985, seven years after his selection into the program. The mission was assigned to *Challenger*, but damage to its heat-resistant exterior tiles from a previous flight had sent it into repair and the crew was reassigned to *Discovery*.¹⁶ Onizuka’s next and last flight almost exactly a year later would be on *Challenger*.

On the unusually cold morning of *Challenger’s* launch, Ellison Onizuka and his six colleagues boarded the orbiter. Ogawa and Grant, Onizuka’s biographers, avoid direct mention of the

¹⁴ *Civil Liberties Act of 1988*, Pub. L. No. 100-383, 102 Stat. 903 (1988), <https://www.govinfo.gov/content/pkg/STATUTE-102/pdf/STATUTE-102-Pg903.pdf>.

¹⁵ “1978 Astronaut Class,” *NASA.gov*, www.nasa.gov/image-feature/1978-astronaut-class.

¹⁶ “STS-51C,” *NASA.gov*, www.nasa.gov/mission_pages/shuttle/shuttlemissions/archives/sts-51C.html; Dennis M. Ogawa and Glen Grant, *Ellison S. Onizuka: A Remembrance* (Honolulu: The Onizuka Memorial Committee/Signature Publishing/Mutual Publishing, 1986), 97.

astronauts' death with the simple sentence, "The *Challenger* carried its precious load into the mystery of the future."¹⁷

The space shuttle program ended in 2011, and by and large, NASA's practical focus turned to "uncrewed" missions, most famously the Hubble Telescope, Mars Rovers, and probes sent to the farther edges of the galaxy. NASA's vision, however, still included "crewed" expeditions with future goals including a space station on the moon, and at the end of 2019, the creation of a new branch of the military, a US Space Force. Still, the astronaut image persists, drawing on popular imaginings of the astronaut in science fiction, film, and television that exert enormous influence on the evolution of the astronaut as a national symbol.¹⁸ As such, Elon Musk's Starman can be reassessed as emblematic of these shifts: privatization of space travel, the co-optation of the astronaut icon by popular culture (the cruising tourist-astronaut), and the preeminence of tech over the increasingly captive and ancillary human body.¹⁹

"With the rigors and dangers of space travel no longer a major threat," Stanley Rosen, captain in the US Air Force, predicted in 1976, no doubt aware of the crisis NASA found itself in during the 1970s, "the days of the 'superman' astronaut will disappear." On the eve of the shuttle program, Rosen noted the "breakoff phenomenon" astronauts felt as they were physically separated from the planet. "I have left the world. There is only the ship to identify myself with, her vibrations are my own. I feel them as intensely as those of my own body," Rosen quotes a test pilot. He continues, "Here is a kind of unreality mixed with reality that I cannot explain to myself. I have an awareness that I have never experienced before, but it does not seem to project beyond this moment . . . And with this adrenalin-inflicted state floats the feeling of detachment." Following Rosen, space enthusiast Frank White coined the term "overview effect" to describe the euphoric recognition astronauts gained as they gazed upon the earth from outer space that humanity was a connected

¹⁷ Ogawa and Grant, *Ellison S. Onizuka*, 151.

¹⁸ Matthew W. Hersch, *Inventing the American Astronaut* (New York: Palgrave, 2012), 131-58.

¹⁹ Although the US Space Program harbored its own money-making goals, the undertaking of space travel by SpaceX—funded by a private corporation—links such endeavors to capitalist endeavors.

whole. Apollo 9's Russell Schweickart, who drifted out of the Lunar Module in 1969 surrounded by the vast universe, was effusive:

The size of [the earth], the significance of it—it becomes both things, it becomes so small and so fragile, and such a precious little spot in that universe, that you can block it out with your thumb, and you realize that on . . . that little blue and white thing, is everything that means anything to you And you realize that you've changed, that there is something new there . . . there's a difference in that relationship between you and the planet, and you and all those other forms of life on that planet It's a difference and it's so precious. And all through this I've used the word YOU because it's not me, it's not Dave Scott, it's not Dick Gordon, Pete Conrad, John Glenn, it's YOU, it's US! . . . it's LIFE . . . and it's not just my problem to integrate, it's not my challenge to integrate, my joy to integrate—it's YOURS, it's EVERYBODY'S.²⁰

Echoing this expansive spiritual embrace, Apollo 14's Edgar Mitchell, one of the few humans to view the earth from the moon's surface, confirmed "an instant global consciousness," that "from out there on the moon, international politics look so petty."²¹

We do not find lyrical "peak experience" language from Ellison Onizuka as expressed by other astronauts—at least not in public sources and memorials. The quote in the US Passport comes from his commencement address to the class of 1980 at Konawaena High School, from where he graduated in 1964. At the time, Onizuka had qualified as a NASA astronaut, eligible as a mission specialist for the space shuttle program. His address is a standard, inspirational, context appropriate message encouraging his young audience to look at "adventurists, the explorers, and doers of the world." In the middle of his address, after praising "the aggressive, the self-starters, the innovative, and the imaginative of the world," he delivered the passage that remains his legacy: "Every generation has the obligation to free men's minds for a look at new worlds, to look out from a higher plateau than the last generation."²²

²⁰ Stanley G. Rosen, "Mind in Space," *USAF Medical Service Digest* 27, no. 1 (Jan-Feb 1976): 4, 6, 7, 14.

²¹ Edgar Mitchell interview, *People*, April 8, 1974, quoted in Pyle, *Space 2.0*, 32.

²² Ogawa and Grant, *Ellison S. Onizuka*, 95; "Make Your Life Count ' . . . and the World 'Will Be a Better Place,'" *Hawaii Tribune-Herald*, February 9, 1986, 7.

After his first space orbiter flight aboard *Discovery*, Onizuka described his view of the earth as “a beautiful planet. It is the most beautiful sight you’ll ever see, something that film just can’t capture.” At a dinner in his honor three months later back in Kona, Onizuka told his audience, “The sight and beauty of the earth is breathtaking from space. It was fun being weightless and to see the challenge of a new frontier and its potential that must be met.” Revealing his deep connection to his home state, he continued, “Our state, this island and Kona are a beautiful sight from space. Thoughts of home and all you beautiful people crossed my mind. I wish I had that (the sight) to share with you. Hawaiian music was playing from space as the shuttle crossed over the Hawaiian chain.” On other occasions, friends recall Onizuka commenting that “through space travel, we were becoming a global village,” and “there are no divisions on earth from space.”²³ Unlike earlier astronauts who waxed eloquently and even rapturously in their “overview effect” comments, what is preserved from Onizuka is less poetic and more restrained. His focus on Hawaii specifically is actually a “local” globalized overview effect given the multi-, inter-racial makeup of the islands. Distinct from more abstract globalized declarations of many of his earth-gazing predecessors, Onizuka’s language is grounded in his history and rooted in his home.²⁴

By the mid-1980s space flight had lost the romance of adventure. NASA’s transformation from “exploration and scientific advancement” had conceded to earthly military and business interests.²⁵ In this context, Onizuka’s comments are fairly unremarkable. The International Space Station (ISS) no longer captured the public whose attention pushed beyond the solar system

²³ Ogawa and Grant, *Ellison S. Onizuka*, 114, 122.

²⁴ Ogawa and Grant, *Ellison S. Onizuka*, 103. Ellison Onizuka is one of 14 NASA Asian American astronauts through the 2017 cohort. These astronauts include: Ellison Onizuka, Taylor Gun-Jin Wang, Franklin Chang-Diaz, Eugene Trinh, Leroy Chiao, Ed Lu, Kalpana Chawla, Mark L. Polansky, Daniel M. Tani, Anousheh Ansari, Sunita Pandya Williams, Kjell N. Lindgren, Raja Chari, Jonathan Kim, Jasmin Moghbeli. NASA includes Anousheh Ansari, Iranian American, in their list of Asian American astronauts; I have included Jasmin Moghbeli, also Iranian American. “Space Station 20: Asian-American Pacific Islander Heritage Month,” *NASA.gov*, May 4, 2020, <https://www.nasa.gov/feature/space-station-20-asian-american-pacific-islander-heritage-month/>.

²⁵ Brian Woods, “A Political History of NASA’s Space Shuttle: The Development Years, 1972–1982,” *The Sociological Review* 57, no. 1_suppl (May 2009): 40–41.

aided by the spectacular images of spinning galaxies, mysterious black holes, and anomalous phenomena. The launching of four “astronomical observatories” that supplied these images, most famously the Hubble telescope launched in 1990, were all made possible and affordable because of the space shuttle and the ISS.²⁶

Daniel Tani, the second Japanese American NASA astronaut, flew three missions and spent more than four months on the ISS. His experience there solidified his view that international cooperation, as well as training in interpersonal compatibility, was essential for the future of space flight. Tani’s training in Russia and months living with Russian cosmonauts in their module led him to conclude that “space flight is not only removing boundaries between people, but strongly forming connections across them where he’s not a Russian to me, he’s a crewmate, he a really great *drug* [friend].” Like Onizuka, Tani connected his experience in space to the reality of home and family. Gazing out at the earth, Tani remembered thinking:

there’s real conflict there. All I see is this beautiful earth . . . for that moment you forget, or you’re allowed to forget the conflict, and the pain, and the suffering that’s happening down there because we live on such a beautiful planet. The emotions I had, that I brought back with me from space are; what an honor it is to be a citizen of this beautiful planet . . . I and the other 8 billion people should feel so lucky that we get to live here and call it our home.²⁷

Yet, “this beautiful planet” remained haunted by Tani’s interned parents during WWII in the Topaz internment camp. Reflecting on this legacy, Tani tried to reconcile the racism of the internment with his duty as a NASA astronaut: “I guess the amazing part of my story, when I think about it, is that here’s a country that chose to take my family out of their homes strictly because of racial connection – not citizenship; my parents were born U.S. citizens –

²⁶ Roger D. Launius and Howard E. McCurdy, *Robots in Space: Technology, Evolution, and Interplanetary Travel* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2008), 156–57; “NASA’s Great Observatories,” *NASA.gov.*, December 2, 2004, https://www.nasa.gov/audience/forstudents/postsecondary/features/F_NASA_Great_Observatories_PS.html.

²⁷“Dan Tani: A Young Boy’s Journey to Space/AMC Online,” *American Center Moscow*, July 7, 2020, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RNnL1Pw7Fjo>, 58:24–58:48; 50:14–51:15.

and restrain them for years, and then learn the lesson, realize that that was not the right thing to do, and apologize for that." However:

Just as amazing is that the citizens of the same country that imprisoned so many now routinely elect Japanese Americans to key local, state and federal government posts, and that one of their own now is an astronaut headed for orbit. It says great things about our nation and about my family. It's great that one generation later the same government can send me into space. I'm very proud of that, both of my family and my nation . . . And I feel lucky to reap the benefits gained by those people that really came early on and had a struggle and made a difference.²⁸

And before Onizuka and Tani, Hikaru Sulu served aboard the *Starship Enterprise* on *Star Trek*. Ahead of its time for its multiracial, multinational, and interplanetary crew, *Star Trek* captured a progressive '60s American inclusivism. NASA has loaned moon rocks and other space memorabilia to *Star Trek* conventions and has hired Lt. Uhura (Michelle Nicols) to star in a recruitment video. Matthew Hersch notes that NASA rode in the wake of *Star Trek's* "faux internationalism" of a "future earth free of geopolitical disputes" to promote cooperation with the Soviet Union to build SkyLab and the docking of *Apollo-Soyuz* spacecraft in 1975.²⁹ NASA was so embedded in popular culture's celebration of space "as a final frontier" that the first shuttle produced, *Constitution*, had its name changed to *Enterprise* when fans of the TV show mounted a massive letter writing campaign. During its unveiling, 2000 guests, including politicians, celebrities, and leading cast members of *Star Trek*, watched the *Enterprise* dramatically emerge from its production hangar as the US Air Force Band of the Golden West performed the *Star Trek* theme song.³⁰

Constance Penley observes that NASA stretched to revitalize its image by borrowing Hollywood's "blockbuster approach" in

²⁸ Todd Halvorson, "Wartime Struggles of Interned Japanese Americans Paved the Way for NASA Astronaut," excerpted in *JAVA Newsletter* (Japanese American Veterans Association of Washington, DC) 9, no. 5 (September/December 2001), <http://www.javadc.org/sep-dec%2001%20newsltr.htm>.

²⁹ Hersch, *Inventing the American Astronaut*, 131, 142-43.

³⁰ Hersch, *Inventing the American Astronaut*, 142-43, 145-46; Woods, "Political History of the Shuttle," 31.

order to "rejuvenate the near-moribund idea of an ideal future."³¹ "This morning, humankind was beginning our venture out into space," George Takei recalls. "With the craft that was about to be introduced to us, we were about to begin our transportation linkage to the entrepreneurial adventure 'out there.'" Musing about the kerfuffle over the shuttle's name change, he added that *Enterprise* "embodied the spirit of initiative, to boldly venture forth, to challenge the unknown, and to make it profitable . . . we television actors were privileged to be part of this momentous event in human history."³² Almost a decade before Ellison Onizuka flew his first mission in 1985, Lieutenant helmsman Sulu, science fiction's most famous Asian American spacefarer, posed with other TV astronauts for photographers before the "real" starship *Enterprise*.

In the overlapping of reality with science fiction, television character with human astronaut, and antecedent firsts (Sulu and Onizuka, *USS Enterprise* and Space Shuttle *Enterprise*), we are prompted to the cover of *Life* magazine's 1969 Special Edition *To the Moon and Back* featuring Buzz Aldrin in his bulky space suit standing on the moon's grey rocky surface. Mirrored in his visor is Neil Armstrong, who in the reflection is taking the picture of Aldrin in "an infinite regress of astronauts." Darren Jorgensen writes that this image captures "the scientific gaze upon the unknown" — that is, humans in space — "as a repetition of the known."³³ Likewise, there is a reoccurring refracting of Japanese American spacefarer avatars: Sulu/Takei, Onizuka, Tani, then Sulu again in the cinematic versions (played by Takei and in later films by Korean American actor John Cho).

We see this recursion of Japanese American spacefarers, for example, in *Star Trek IV: The Voyage Home* (1986) involving the *Enterprise* time traveling 300 years back to 1986 California. As the *Enterprise* approaches the Bay Area, Sulu reveals that he was born in San Francisco, grounding him historically to the Asian American

³¹ Constance Penley, *NASA/TREK: Popular Science and Sex in America* (New York/London: Routledge/Verso, 1997), 12, 24–25.

³² George Takei, *To the Stars: The Autobiography of George Takei Star Trek's Mr. Sulu* (New York: Pocket Books/Simon & Schuster, 1994), 317–18.

³³ "Most Influential Images of All Time," *Time Magazine*, <http://100photos.time.com/photos/neil-armstrong-nasa-man-on-moon>; Darren Jorgensen, "Middle America, the Moon, the Sublime, and the Uncanny," in *Space Travel & Culture: From Apollo to Space Tourism*, eds. David Bell and Martin Parker (Hoboken, NJ: Wiley/Blackwell, 2009), 187.

community and presaging Takei's coming out as gay in 2005. 1986, of course, is the year of the *Challenger* disaster that narratively would have occurred months before the *Enterprise* arrives. And, in fact, the film opens with a dedication from "the cast and crew of Star Trek . . . to the men and women of the spaceship *Challenger* whose courageous spirit shall live to the 23rd century and beyond." A scene omitted from the film had Sulu meeting a child on the street who turns out to be his ancestor. The novelization of the film has the child speaking Japanese to Sulu turn out to be his great-great-great grandfather, Akira Sulu.³⁴

This cross-referencing, transmedial phenomenon of the Japanese American astronaut across film, novelization, autobiography, memorial volume, photo, YouTube video, fandom websites, Asian American history, etc., is something we see again and again.³⁵ In the 2016 reboot film *Star Trek Beyond*, Sulu is revealed to be male-partnered with a daughter, a gesture to actor George Takei's gay activism and marriage. In *ST:TNG*, the fictional *USS Enterprise's* shuttle "Onizuka" returns us to NASA's heroization of the *Challenger* crew.

The syncretism/intermediality between science and science fiction as systems of meaning and knowledge production continues to drive speculation around human space travel and the search for and even contact with extraterrestrial intelligence. Counter-intuitively, science fiction has and continues to suggest, model, and predict the science and technology of space travel and exploration. In the 1960s and 1970s, NASA and science fiction narratives were mutually reinforcing. And so it is that the science fictional Asian American astronaut Sulu preceded and created the space for Onizuka and the ongoing avatars of Asian American spacefarers through refraction and cross-referencing between the science fictional (Sulu) and the real (Takei). Jorgensen's comment about how science's "gaze" repeats what is already known includes our

³⁴ James Satter, "The Hidden Homosexual: Reexamining 'Star Trek's Sulu," *Science Fiction Studies* 33, no. 2 (July, 2006): 381-82 [379-83]; *Memory Alpha*, s.v. "Star Trek IV: The Voyage Home," https://memory-alpha.fandom.com/wiki/Star_Trek_IV:_The_Voyage_Home; Vonda McIntyre, *Star Trek IV: The Voyage Home* (London: Severn House, 1987), 112-13.

³⁵ Irina O. Rajewsky, "Intermediality, Intertextuality, and Remediation: A Literary Perspective on Intermediality," *Intermedialités/Intermediality*, 6 (Fall 2005): 46.

histories, knowledges, ideologies, etc., as well as science fiction's *megatext*; the cumulative and ongoing compendium of "imagined worlds and their inhabitants, created via specific rhetorical moves, tools and lexicons." Indeed, one of the functions of the science fiction megatext is its "icon-echoing" function across texts and platforms, its intermediality. The Sulu/Takei formula inaugurated a "public megatext," preparing the ground for Ellison Onizuka and every other Asian American astronaut that follows, including the fictional 1994 astronaut, Race Banyon, in a *The Simpsons* episode who, like Sulu, is ambiguously "Asian American."³⁶

The fictional Sulu is not, of course, Onizuka, or Tani, or Chowla, or . . . , but the icon remains and is established according to the rules of the megatext where "none of the candidates (Alien, robot, spaceship, etc.) has a single conventional weight or measure even within a given generic timeframe or publishing regime."³⁷ Sulu's profile, originally intended to be generically "Asian," over time and through influence by other versions of him in the science fiction megatext and other media (and here we include accounts of the *Challenger* tragedy, genealogy, race in the US, etc.), eventually reflects the actor's life, becoming Japanese American, and then in 2016, gay.³⁸

The Japanese American astronaut as a transmedia icon is always tied to the history and lived experience of Japanese America: Sulu's evolution is tied to George Takei's evolution. The Japanese American astronaut is, by extension, part of the broader sweep of Asian America in the shared predicaments—patterns of discrimination and stereotyping. Ellison Onizuka's biographers emphasized his Hawaii, Kona "local boy" multiculturalism; "one

³⁶ Istvan Csicsery-Ronay, Jr., *The Seven Beauties of Science Fiction* (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 2008), 107; "Deep Space Homer," *The Simpsons*, Season 5, Episode 15, aired February 24, 1994. The deep connection between NASA and popular culture astronauts is well established by including Buzz Aldrin in the cast (voiced by Buzz Aldrin). The episode is tied to the 1986 *Challenger* disaster and subsequent cancellation of the Teacher in Space Project that recruited Christa McAuliffe. The episode focuses on NASA's attempt to regain public attention, measured as TV ratings and funding by sending an "average American" on the space shuttle. Privately, however, NASA officials in the episode are looking for a "blue collar slob."

³⁷ Damien Broderick, *Reading by Starlight: Postmodern Science Fiction* (London, New York: Routledge, 1995), 60.

³⁸ George Takei, *To The Stars*, 218; *Memory Alpha*, s.v. "Hikaru Sulu," https://memory-alpha.fandom.com/wiki/Hikaru_Sulu.

who grew up on the mauka side of Kona, who was just one of the boys.”³⁹ The Japanese American astronaut is, of course, an Asian American astronaut; but all Asian American astronauts are descended from the Japanese American astronaut avatar.

Yet, even as issues of Asian American identity continue to set the Asian American spacefarer apart from the white American astronaut, the projection of space as a vast blank canvas for humanity’s dreams of utopia persists. The hyperbolic language around space as a vast, untapped frontier receptive to human entry is pervasive in American culture. “Ultimately, going out to the frontier is not a technological achievement, but an accomplishment of the human spirit,” writes Frank White, author of the widely read book *The Overview Effect*, now in its third edition. “Space,” White rhapsodizes,

is a metaphor for expansiveness, opportunity, and freedom. More than a place or even an experience, it is a state of mind. It is a physical, mental, and spiritual dimension in which humanity can move beyond the current equilibrium point, begin to change, and eventually transform itself into something so extraordinary that we cannot imagine it.⁴⁰

White’s views are widespread in space worker culture, with social scientists outside of space interests recently taking interest in the phenomenon.⁴¹ The seduction of the Overview Effect (and its spin-offs, the Ultraview Effect, and Orbital Perspective) coincides with the promises and opportunities afforded by viewing space as a virgin final frontier to be taken advantage of by spacefaring nations, and companies like SpaceX, Boeing, and Virgin. White’s statement that real space is a metaphor for “expansiveness, opportunity, and freedom” hides the real material cost of human expansion, opportunity, and the freedom to conquer, exploit, and possess. When Buzz Aldrin planted the US flag on the moon in 1969, he reenacted an ancient ritual that declared discovery and therefore

³⁹ Ogawa and Grant, *Ellison S. Onizuka*, 13, 20, 103.

⁴⁰ Frank White, *The Overview Effect: Space Exploration and Human Evolution*, 3rd ed. (Reston, VA: American Institute of Aeronautics and Astronautics, Inc., 2014), 167.

⁴¹ “Houston We Have a Podcast,” *NASA.gov*, Episode 107, June 11, 2019, <https://www.nasa.gov/johnson/HWHAP/the-overview-effect>; Deana L. Wiebel, “The Overview Effect and the Ultraview Effect: How Extreme Experiences in/of Outer Space Influence Religious Beliefs in Astronauts,” *Religions* 11, no. 8: 418 (2020): 2-14.

possession under the Doctrine of Discovery. Fortunately for the moon, Aldrin's action fell under the 1967 international Outer Space Treaty, which declares that "[o]uter space, including the moon and other celestial bodies, is not subject to national appropriation by claim of sovereignty, by means of use or occupation, or by any other means."⁴² Nevertheless, current wrangling over asteroid mining licensing rights by private corporations may result in changes to international agreements as the legal meaning of celestial objects as "global commons" accessible to peaceful endeavors evolves.⁴³

What then, can the Japanese American astronaut mean in the context of competing visions of space frontiers that cannot escape the gravity of earth's burdens of violence, racism, and capitalist exploitation? De Witt Douglas Kilgore suggests that the actions and struggles of Asian Americans as embodied and imagined in Takei/Sulu have influence on the future of space travel. "Takei's appropriation of *Star Trek's* promises to stake his own claim to America's future" inspired his activism on behalf of Asian American and LGBTQ communities, Douglas Kilgore argues. And in this way, Sulu and Takei "push the boundaries of convention . . . exceed[ing] the physical and social imperatives that structure the contemporary order."⁴⁴ Catapulted into space, Japanese Americans push boundaries beyond the provincial multicultural exceptional "first" (Japanese American/woman/lesbian, etc.) to go into space, or appear in a major television series. Whether the local solar system or the unimaginable interstellar expanse, outer space continues to be white space. The near future of human space travel will continue to struggle with the obstacle of whiteness as the "unmarked" (read: "normal" and unexamined) status of humanity, and thus the basis for imagining humanity's future beyond the earth.⁴⁵ Imagined to be blank, homogenous, and redemptive, Americans transfer the connection of such "pure" (read: white) spaces with the mechanism of the frontier. George Lipsitz's observations about American

⁴² "Treaty on Principles Governing the Activities of States in the Exploration and Use of Outer Space, Including the Moon and Other Celestial Bodies," *U.S. Department of State*, January 27, 1967, <https://2009-2017.state.gov/t/isn/5181.htm>.

⁴³ Frans Von Der Dunk, "Who Owns the Moon? A Space Lawyer Answers," *The Conversation*, July 20, 2018, <https://theconversation.com/who-owns-the-moon-a-space-lawyer-answers-99974>.

⁴⁴ De Witt Douglas Kilgore, *Astrofuturism: Science, Race, and Visions of Utopia in Space* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2003), 27, 3, 238.

⁴⁵ Ross Chambers, "The Unexamined," *Minnesota Review* 47 (Fall 1996): 141-56.

landscapes is appropriate here: “the lived experience of race has a spatial dimension, and the lived experience of space has a racial dimension.”⁴⁶

To speak of racial difference and insist on divergent histories of the American astronaut as racialized spacefarers who carry with them the history and effects of racism runs counter to the “classical” narratives of humanity in space as a multiethnic, international, species-cooperative endeavor. Yet, it is out of the Japanese American megatext that gives meaning to Ellison Onizuka’s directive: “Every generation has the obligation to free men’s minds for a look at new worlds . . . to look out from a higher plateau than the last generation.”

Transcendence and the Japanese American Astronaut Megatext

In many ways, Onizuka’s response to his role provides insight for balancing the call to transcendence and the realities of his own history and the history of Japanese Americans. For a more general audience, his words can perhaps draw one back (to earth) to a critical acknowledgement of the present moment, in which bodies are always “raced” and the diversity of our current institutions—NASA and religious studies—are both predicated on a representation of socially-constructed difference no matter how aspirational the aim. For Asian American religious studies scholars, Onizuka is a reminder that our work is inherently tied to the (human) spirit that transcends bounds of racial and religious identity. Religious imagination is indeed the vast frontier. This imagination is undoubtedly tempered by colonial restrictions and the edicts of empire, of which we are acutely aware. However, religious imagination represents a geo-psychic plane in which the spiritual traveler consistently exceeds and disrupts these boundaries in the search for possibility. Whether spurred on by joy or pain, Asian American religious subjects continue to journey across this plane in their mission to maintain hope and vitality. From their experience, new religious technologies emerge, which we, as religious studies scholars and theologians, have the privilege and duty to catalog. As Kwok Pui-lan notes: “We will need to cultivate a reading habit

⁴⁶ Lipsitz’s “space” refers specifically to city environments; we read the term “space” subjunctively here. George Lipsitz, “The Racialization of Space and the Spatialization of Race: Theorizing the Hidden Architecture of Landscape,” *Landscape Journal* 26, no. 1 (2007): 14–15, 12.

outside our field to catch up with the world, since the study of religion is so backward looking."⁴⁷

We expand Kwok's forward call by exploring what is gained by considering how Asian Americans in outer space open up and transcend the boundaries set by earthly "religion" in its denominational particularity. Ellison Onizuka as "the first Jodo Shinshu Buddhist in outer space" has meaning for the immediate space future, a Star Trekkian utopia imagined as a pluralist and democratic final frontier. For even as the Asian American astronaut's tethers to Earth are stretched to their limit on the ISS or the moon's surface, Earth remains the center of focus. With mother earth orienting the astronaut's sense of space and distance, what is left behind is only temporary until the return trip.⁴⁸

Scholars of religion and theologians have already carved out the contours for considering the questions and predicaments humans will confront in space. For example, a recent anthology gathers scholars, theologians, and writers who are "in agreement that outer space will play some crucial role in our future, and our spirituality will be a necessary part of this, a toolkit of the soul that we take with us when we voyage to the stars." The inclusion of science fiction stories augurs well for valuing what is not yet, but perhaps possible at the outer reaches of the solar system. Yet, the tethers to earth's context finds the collection, as with NASA of the 1960s, almost completely white and male. "Almost everyone in this anthology," the editors write, "holds that humans in outer space will strengthen the spiritual beliefs we bring with us from the Earth."⁴⁹

Equally concerning is the lack of representation in the scholarly conversations around astrotheology, defined by one of the emergent field's founders as:

⁴⁷ Kwok, "Transmodern, Transnational, Transdisciplinary, Trans . . .", viii.

⁴⁸ Dani Tani confirms this orientation commenting on a spacewalk outside the ISS, "We weren't so close to the planets and the moon, so the moon and planets for us looked the same because we didn't go that far we were rolling a couple of hundred kilometres." Asked about hardships in space, he replied, "The biggest hardship is just being separat[ed] from my family, that is the hardest part." Angy Essam, "A Journey to the Space with Acclaimed Astronaut Daniel Tani," *Egypt Today*, July 7, 2019, <https://www.egypttoday.com/Article/4/72538/A-journey-to-the-space-with-acclaimed-astronaut-Daniel-Tani>.

⁴⁹ Paul Levinson and Michael Waltemathe, eds., *Touching the Face of the Cosmos: On the Intersection of Space Travel and Religion* (New York: Connected Editions, 2016), 3.

the place of cosmic space in Christian theological reflection along with the reflection of Jewish and Muslim thinkers . . . we are lovers of God and appreciators of the beauty and order of God's creation. We are grateful for the sciences which aid us in knowing and treasuring the wondrous intricacies of the natural world. God has graced civilization by granting rewards for scientific sweat, by granting the prize of knowledge for running the research race. In our prayers we thank God for science.

However, a few sentences later, a more narrow, and to our mind, troubling definition of astrotheology's purpose for Christian supremacy is presented:

*Astrotheology is that branch of theology which provides a critical analysis of the contemporary space sciences combined with an explication of classic doctrines such as creation and Christology for the purpose of constructing a comprehensive and meaningful understanding of our human situation within an astonishingly immense cosmos (italics in original).*⁵⁰

Astrotheology, in this particular instance, is unapologetically Christian. The issue is not perhaps with the Christian lens, but the unacknowledged privilege to define an emerging branch of theological reflection in its image.

As scholars of religion, we prefer to avoid promoting specific religious traditions in our speculations about humanity's space futures. Rather, the expanse awaiting humanity off world leads us to look from that "higher plateau" led by Asian American spacefarers. We propose to move beyond geocentric and historically burdened concepts of "religion," in favor of experiences of transcendence yet to be discovered. The universe cannot, indeed, must not be defined and purposed by provincial terrestrial "religions." (And so we are affronted by the recently posed astrotheological question: "Did Jesus Die for Klingons, too?") But neither can we escape human history and naively leave ourselves open to vague, innocent "spirituality" or engage in privileged sunny

⁵⁰ Ted Peters, "Introducing Astrotheology," in *Astrotheology: Science and Theology Meet Extraterrestrial Life*, ed. Ted Peters (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2018), 11-12. Note alternatives to astrotheology in Steven J. Dick, "Cosmic Evolution: History, Culture, and Human Destiny," in *Cosmos and Culture: Cultural Evolution in a Cosmic Context*, eds. Steven J. Dick and Mark L. Lupisella (Washington, DC: NASA, 2009), 38-49.

discourse about humanity touching “the infinity of the cosmos.”⁵¹ We agree, then, with Douglas Cowan, who critiques the “rather restrictive dichotomy” of thinking about religion as a boundary between the transcendent (“god/supernatural”) and immanent (humans) in favor of the “hope of passing beyond” the limits of what we have come to accept as normative “religion” or “spirituality.”⁵² In the direction of Cowan’s arguments for how forms of transcendence are productive alternatives for thinking about human experience in the context of space, we turn to a brief discussion of three recent Asian American interventions into how religion is traditionally studied and practiced.

Asian American scholars of religion have already begun to erase the boundaries of religious traditions and of “religion” itself. For example, Russell Jeung, Seanan Fong, and Helen Kim’s recent description of Chinese American “familism” as a better, group-specific description of the moral orientation and ethic of care among second-generation Chinese Americans rethinks Asian American transcendence outside the received scholarly “world religions” categories. Familism consists of “a set of values, narratives, and ethics that offer an ethical way of being and a source of identity for individuals.” Based on social science research, Jeung, Fong and Kim’s conclusions lead them to a superior vantage point for a decolonized understanding of how the religious/secular dichotomy in the sociological study of religion remains bound to a Western paradigm. “Rather than seeing contemporary America as an increasingly secular society, much like the paradigm used to think about a secularizing Europe,” they argue:

[S]cholars would benefit from reorienting their gaze toward the Pacific to see how the U.S. is increasingly a reflection of China, which has historically embraced religious pluralism,

⁵¹ Christian Weidemann, “Did Jesus Die for Klingons, Too? Christian Faith and Extraterrestrial Salvation,” in *Touching the Face of the Cosmos: On the Intersection of Space Travel and Religion*, eds. Paul Levinson and Michael Waltemathe (New York: Connected Editions, 2016), 124–34; Paul Levinson, “The Missing Orientation,” *Religions* 12, no. 1:16 (2021): 2, <https://doi.org/10.3390/rel12010016>.

⁵² Cowan, *Sacred Space*, 19. NASA insider Steven J. Dick’s less denominational “cosmotheology” has as its fourth principle “that we must be open to radically new conceptions of God grounded in cosmic evolution, including the idea of a ‘natural’ rather than a ‘supernatural’ God.” We prefer Cowan’s open-ended formulation because it overcomes Dick’s binary view of “god”/humans. Dick, “Cosmic Evolution,” 39–40.

skepticism toward the supernatural, and relational responsibilities. That is, even in the study of the unaffiliated [i.e., “religious nones”], scholars can benefit from the reminder that America is as much a Pacific civilization as it is an Atlantic civilization.⁵³

Drawing insight from Chinese concepts governing family relationships and responsibilities, these scholars reject the orientalizing of Chinese Americans as products of static ancient traditions. By acknowledging the dynamics that accompany generational and intersectional factors as racial minorities in the US, Jeung, Fong, and Kim leave open the option that the strength of Chinese American familism may erode over generations, transformed and transcended by new factors and contexts.⁵⁴ This open, flexible view of Chinese American life is itself the engine of transcendence even as it honors the past and acknowledges the “unseen order” of ancestors and obligations to the family.

A second example from Asian American religious studies that overcomes existing definitions and boundaries that limit Asian American transcendence is Chenxing Han’s exploration of second-generation Asian American Buddhists. The study of Asian American Buddhists has been bound by the questionable dichotomy of the Two Buddhisms model that has dictated the discourse around American Buddhism since 1979.⁵⁵ As Han notes:

The dominant story of Buddhism in America is that there are “two Buddhisms”: the Buddhism of white converts and the Buddhism of Asian immigrants. . . . Though hardly its intended impact, the “two Buddhisms” story too easily lends itself to less-than-flattering portrayals of Asian American Buddhists.⁵⁶

⁵³ Russell M. Jeung, Seanan S. Fong, and Helen Jin Kim, eds., *Family Sacrifices: The Worldviews and Ethics of Chinese Americans* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2019), 175, 170. Their description of Chinese American familism here is reminiscent of decolonized definitions of religion that avoid centering “the sacred” as the *sine qua non* of religion.

⁵⁴ Jeung, Fong, and Kim, *Family Sacrifices*, 170–72.

⁵⁵ Charles Prebish, *American Buddhism* (Belmont, CA: Duxbury Press/Wadsworth, 1979), 51–52.

⁵⁶ Chenxing Han, *Be The Refuge: Raising the Voices of Asian American Buddhists* (Berkeley, CA: North Atlantic Books, 2021), 10.

According to this long-held dominant model, Buddhism as practiced by Asian Americans is viewed as “cultural baggage” – something that Asian American immigrants carry forward from their country and culture of origin with little thought or creative invention. In her study of Buddhist practice among second- and multi-generational Asian Americans, Han not only brings to light the perspectives and voices of a significant group of practitioners, but also complicates the existing model. Within her framework, young adult Asian American Buddhists are “trailblazers,” “bridge-builders,” “integrators,” and “refuge-makers.” Han’s categories acknowledge the ways in which Asian Americans are active in shaping their Buddhist engagement as well as transforming our understanding of American Buddhism and religious belonging in the US. Her challenge to the monolithic labels of “ethnic Buddhist” and “immigrant Buddhist” (read non-white, perpetual foreigner) opens up spaces for Asian American Buddhists to breathe and flourish.

While Han provides a rich set of examples and perspectives, it would be easy for these voices to once again be subsumed under her reconfigured structure. However, her choice to write in a nonlinear fashion, drawing from a number of genres, highlights the complexity of the project. Han defies and transcends the conventions of social science writing (background, literature review, data presentation, discussion and analysis) and instead weaves personal narrative, self-reflection, letter-writing, poetry, ethnographic description, and scholarly discussion into the fabric of the book. As such, Han’s book is not only an accounting of the religious lives of young Asian American Buddhists, but also a meditation and a manifesto that elevates the reader to recognize the multiplicity of perspectives and appreciate the integrity of the whole, enacting its own “overview effect” – but one grounded in the lives of the author and her subjects. Its innovative form and delivery render an appropriate contribution to the Asian American megatext, breaking down dichotomies and moving us to recognize the realities of a new generation of Asian American Buddhists.

Our final example turns to a different form of knowing. We live in a Copernican universe; we are no longer the center of creation, no longer the measure for whatever is met beyond the limit of the sun’s gravity. So, too, is the situation for the Asian American religious studies scholar who is compelled to follow our subjects into religious

outlooks that defy the conventions and boundaries of the given field. Asian American science fiction writer Ted Chiang reminds us of the dangers of positioning us as just a little lower than the angels in his story, "Omphalos," where, on an alternate Earth, an astronomer's startling discovery challenges an entire worldview constructed and maintained by religion and science. The narrator of the story, an archaeologist whose fame has been built upon proving the plenitude of earth's creation occurring in a single moment, is shaken by the possibility that humanity is not the intended purpose for the universe. Instead, humanity is "the result of a separate act of creation, an experiment or test performed as a rehearsal for the main undertaking" of life elsewhere, or worse, "that the creation of humanity was an unintended side effect, a kind of 'sympathetic vibration'" in relation to other living beings in the universe. Wrestling with the inevitable crises of faith in both religion and science, the archaeologist comes to the liberating realization that making choices, having the free will to ask questions, and exploring the universe is the true miracle of creation. Here, Chiang's god-lite universe is revealed. The archaeologist eventually comes to accept the consequences of new knowledge about the universe and the promise of the unknown:

I've devoted my life to studying the wondrous mechanism that is the universe, and doing so has given me a sense of fulfillment. I've always assumed that this meant that I was acting in accordance with your will, Lord, and your reason for making me. But if it's in fact true that you have no purpose in mind for me, then that sense of fulfillment has arisen solely from within myself. What that demonstrates to me is that we as humans are capable of creating meaning for our own lives.

Chiang offers transcendence in line with Cowan's question, "what happens when the revelation of transcendence is revealed to be little more than the redaction of immanents (i.e., humans)?" The archaeologist responds, "Free will is a kind of miracle; when we make a genuine choice, we bring about a result that cannot be reduced to the workings of physical law. Every act of volition is, like

the creation of the universe, a first cause.”⁵⁷ The issue here is not about the existence or presence of “god,” but “the shifting boundaries along which we line up our competing understandings of the unseen order. It is not that transcendence [i.e., “god] disappears,” Cowan argues, “so much as it relocates. The boundaries that constitute the current limits of the quest are reset. Transcendence, then, is not a function of immanence, but of boundaries, and in every boundary lies the hope of passing beyond.”⁵⁸

In Chiang’s work, it is precisely this shifting boundary between known and unknown where human curiosity, choice, and action can result in knowledge and insight to move forward. Human inquisitiveness about the universe as “a nearly divine engine” is precisely the relocation of transcendence to which Cowan refers.⁵⁹ “I think that when scientists discover something new about the universe, I imagine that what they feel is almost identical to what deeply religious people feel when they feel like they are in the presence of God,” Chiang notes in a recent interview. He continues:

I wish that we could get back a little of that attitude, instead of thinking of religion and science as being fundamentally diametrically opposed. And the idea that science drains all the wonder out of the universe, I don’t think that’s true. I think science adds wonder to the universe. And so, I feel like one aspect of that earlier [Renaissance] attitude of when scientists could be religious, there’s one aspect of that, which I think I would like it if we could retain.⁶⁰

Ted Chiang’s speculative work is a valuable contribution to the Asian American megatext, helping us imagine and strive for what is beyond the boundary of human limits, species being, and, to

⁵⁷ Ted Chiang, “Omphalos,” *Exhalation* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2019), 236–69.

⁵⁸ Cowan, *Sacred Space*, 19.

⁵⁹ Joyce Carol Oates, “Science Fiction Doesn’t Have to be Dystopian,” *The New Yorker*, May 13, 2019, <https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2019/05/13/science-fiction-doesnt-have-to-be-dystopian>; Chiang is most widely known for the 1998 “The Story of Your Life” involving communication between humans and time travelling aliens. The short story served as the basis for the popular and brainy 2016 film *Arrival*, nominated for eight Academy Awards.

⁶⁰ “The Ezra Klein Show. Transcript: Ezra Klein Interviews Ted Chiang,” *The New York Times*, March 30, 2021, <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/03/30/podcasts/ezra-klein-podcast-ted-chiang-transcript.html>.

resurrect an old idea, things of “Ultimate Concern.” “I think of science fiction as a way of using speculative or fantastic scenarios to examine the human condition, and that can apply to the Asian American experience just as much as to anyone else’s,” Chiang observes. These scenarios “might include experiences of cultural difference and otherness, but it could also include things that no one would readily predict.”⁶¹ “Omphalos” forces us to revisit and reconsider the fundamental question about our place in the universe; Chiang is not just providing us with a rehearsal of 500 years of debate about our species’ uniqueness since Giordano Bruno’s heresy of a fecund universe. He reveals to us a tension between the comfort of science’s empiricism buttressed by religious faith and then the dissolution of everything the archaeologist knows, seen and unseen. We then see the moment of illumination by the archaeologist who has no option but to leave behind her world(view) in the face of incontestable astrophysical evidence, opening up infinite possibilities for human futures.

Science fiction is typically viewed as not concerned with religion. Chiang, however, is comfortable writing against convention and, in so doing, gives us more to consider than the “scientific” speculation that undergirds the genre and that has largely determined our view of humanity in space. Recognizing this ability to overcome the supposed science versus religion dichotomy in the genre, Ezra Klein of the *New York Times* declares, nevertheless, that “Chiang is one of the great living writers of religious fiction, even though he’s an atheist and sci-fi legend.”⁶² In the context of what transcendence might mean for the Asian American astronaut and religious studies scholar, Chiang’s stance against conventional science fiction’s ambivalence about religion overcomes expectation, convention and dichotomous worldviews. Chiang’s writing, in essence, shifts our perspective and shatters worlds, opening us up to new philosophical and theological possibilities.

⁶¹ Mayumi Tsutakawa, “‘Worlds Beyond Here’ Explores Asian American Impact on Science Fiction,” *The Seattle Globalist*, October 17, 2018, <https://seattleglobalist.com/2018/10/17/going-beyond-hollywood-to-explore-asian-americans-in-science-fiction/77768>.

⁶² “The Ezra Klein Show.”

Conclusion: Asian Americans Traveling through Space and Time

*Don't you know we were born to fly
Spread our wings and fly through space and time . . .
The Slants, "Love Letters from Andromeda"*

Our exploration of the Japanese American spacefarer, real and fictional, introduces questions and concerns when thinking about humanity's future in space. Of central concern is an overly enthusiastic embrace of the universe as a pristine frontier – available and meant for human exploration, colonization—and an accompanying amnesia over the violence, exploitation, and destruction of the natural world. Ellison Onizuka, Dan Tani, and Hikaru Sulu/George Takei remind us that outer space is not blank, innocent, or free from our history. To be Asian American in outer space means transporting Asian American histories and experience as part of the endeavor and having these histories and experiences assist in how we can understand and learn from what is yet to be encountered. In that sense, Asian American spacefaring is not about escaping who we are by donning the anonymizing spacesuit and, in doing so, erasing particularity. Asian Americans in space carry into the future what we have endured and continue to overcome. The Asian American rock band, The Slants, whose music and activism speak directly to issues of racism and social justice, offer us a final glimpse into an Asian American space future through yet another medium. As Filipino American historian Steff San Buenaventura envisioned over two decades ago, our mission as Asian American religious studies scholars is not simply to document the lives and material conditions of our religious subjects, but to “behold and capture their religious imagination across time and space.”⁶³ Such a directive literally opens up a multiplicity of imaginative horizons and worldviews—tethered, yet open and pleading—that both enliven the study of Asian American religious devotion and practice and represent a dimension without which the documentation of the religious lives of our subjects remain incomplete. Hence, in Ellison

⁶³ Steffi San Buenaventura, “Asian American Religious Studies” (Asian Pacific and American Religions Research Initiative Conference, 1999). The quote is paraphrased.

Onizuka's words, we must forever recall that "[our] vision is not limited by what [our] eyes can see, but by what [our] mind can imagine."⁶⁴

⁶⁴ "Make Your Life Count," 7.

Afterward:
Kwok Pui-lan
The Legacies and Futures of De-Centered Religion Scholarship

Frank Yamada

Kwok Pui-lan is one of the premier constructive theologians of her generation. She has been and is a mentor to hundreds of Asian and Asian North American scholars of religion across many disciplines. Most know her for her pioneering work in postcolonial theology or for her highly decorated career as a master teacher. However, her most significant impact on the study of religion has been in her ability to create a field. Indeed, in her scholarship and in her cultivation of Asian and Asian North American scholars, she has influenced the study of religion and theology across many disciplines for generations to come. I would also argue that these trajectories point to the future of the study of religion and theology – a future where the center is de-centered, and where multiple places on the margins have voice and authority.

Kwok Pui-lan has shaped who I am as a scholar, a teacher, an administrator, and as a leader in theological education. She has played a direct role in all these aspects of my life and vocation. This personal testimony is something that hundreds of other scholars could share. I first met her at a conference of the Asian Pacific American Religions Research Initiative (APARRI) in 2001, organized by Jane Naomi Iwamura and Paul Spickard. APARRI began in the 1990s as a self-organized gathering of early career faculty and doctoral students focused on the study of Asian and Asian North American religions. Scholars of religion and theologians such as Rudy Busto, Rita Nakashima Brock, Jane Naomi Iwamura, David Kyuman Kim, Rachel Bundang, Nami Kim, Tim Tseng, Khyati Joshi, Carolyn Chen, Russell Jeung, Sharon Suh, Anne Wonhee Joh, Grace Ji-Sun Kim, Uriah Kim, Henry Reitz, and dozens more made up the religiously and ethnically diverse group of colleagues who supported and shared our scholarship with each other. Some studied Asian religions. Some were Christian theologians and

biblical scholars. Some were sociologists who studied the role of religion in Asian American studies. We shared a commitment to foregrounding the importance of the Asian American experience in our religious fields of discourse. Others of my colleagues argued for the importance of the study of religion to better understand the experience of Asians in America. For example, the scholars who created or supported APARRI, such as Iwamura, Busto, and Brock, introduced the study of religion to the Association of Asian American Studies by organizing in 1996 the first panel on religion ever held at their annual conference. Kwok Pui-lan and other established scholars such as Gale Yee, Rita Nakashima Brock, Kah-Jin Jeffrey Kuan, Tat-siong Benny Liew, and Fumitaka Matsuoka were mentors to all of us. Dr. Kwok modeled for us what it meant to be a prominent scholar, one who took seriously the sources of the Asian and Asian American experience for her work. She promoted values such as interdisciplinary scholarship, collegiality, and rigorous engagement of one another's work, always striving for excellence. In this way, she played a critical role in shaping the identity of newer generations of scholars, and laying the foundation for new and emerging fields of scholarly discourse.

Gatherings such as APARRI and the Pacific, Asian, and Asian North American Women in Theology and Ministry (PANAAWTM), which was co-founded in 1985 by Kwok, Brock, Nantawan Lewis, Hyung Kyung Chung, Patria Augustine, and Yasuko Grosjean, were not only a place for the next generation of Asian and Asian North American scholars and faith leaders to develop their scholarly voices in the early stages of their careers, but these conferences were also grassroots mentoring communities in which well-established scholars of Asian descent and white allies, such as Spickard, Letty Russell, and Shannon Clarkson, nurtured communities of scholarship, collegiality, and professional identities. It is worth noting that other women of color and white feminist scholars often played instrumental roles in supporting the agency of these groups. Their grassroots nature meant that even the mentoring took on a different shape and tone, as the early career Asian and Asian American scholars and graduate students took on leadership of these groups. In this way, both senior and emerging scholars were contributing to the formation of a movement within their respective fields. Such collaborations led to many advancements for religious and theological scholarship and contributed to a de-centering of

white, male normativity in the guilds.¹ Similar to stories in the Hebrew Bible—the mother of Moses, Shiphrah and Puah, and the daughter of Pharaoh—it took the actions of women who sought to preserve life in the face of death, for future generations of a community to continue to live. The activism and vision of feminist Asian and Asian North American scholars, along with the allyship and advocacy from white feminists and women scholars of color, was instrumental to the emergence of these fields and the scholars who produced in them. These communities of mentoring were networks of empowerment situated on the margins of the established guilds. Through her leadership, Kwok Pui-lan leveraged her position and respect within the academy to bring others along with her, opening doors of access to future generations of scholars. These groups provided places of belonging and scholarly identity formation for Asian and Asian North American scholars and religious leaders.

These conference and communities of formation had features that shaped the discourses and values of emerging fields. Characteristics included:

(1) Interdisciplinary scholarship. While interdisciplinary work was not unique to this group of scholars or these fields, it was the intersections of religion/theology with Asian American studies that grounded them. By taking this approach, scholars were able to articulate the important contributions that religion played to the understanding of the Asian American experience while also making contributions to their fields with Asian sources of knowledge that emerged from the particularities of the experiences of Asians in America.

(2) Networking, organizing, and collegiality. These groups were mentoring hubs for an emerging group of scholars and religious leaders. It built connections between early career scholars and graduate students with established senior scholars, most of whom were working at predominantly white institutions of higher learning. The connections and peer support that were central to these conferences supported the scholarship that was emerging from these different fields and led to the formation of groups in the mid-

¹ See, for example, Fernando F. Segovia and Mary Ann Tolbert, eds., *Reading from this Place: Social Location and Biblical Interpretation in the United States* (Augsburg Fortress, 1995); and Kwok Pui-lan and Rachel A. R. Bundang, "PANAATM Lives!" *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion* 21, no. 2 (Fall, 2005): 147–58.

1990s, such as the Asian North American Religion, Culture, and Society Group of the American Academy of Religion, and the Asian American Biblical Hermeneutics Group of the Society of Biblical Literature.

(3) Diversity. These groups were diverse because of the scholars who participated in them. They were ethnically diverse, comprised of the various Asian and Pacific Islander groups that make up the fabric of Asian America. The scholars were diverse in terms of their disciplines and included religion scholars, sociologists, constructive theologians, and biblical scholars. They were also generationally diverse, both in terms of the generations of their families that had been in the US and in terms of the stages of their career in the academy.

(4) Foregrounding of the experiences of Asians in America. Though ethnically and generationally diverse, these groups stressed the importance of the Asian and Asian North American experience for their scholarship, ministry, and leadership. Because these conferences were ethnically diverse, these groups were functional coalitions that sought the common agenda of advocating for the importance and vitality of Asian and Asian North American communities and experience, both on behalf of their communities of accountability *and* as a contribution to theological education as a whole. In the decades since, a growing transnational agenda has emerged, deeply influenced by the proleptic work of Kwok Pui-lan.

(5) Nurturing future generations. While the beginnings of these groups were shaped through peer support and the mentoring that came from senior scholars, the participants at these conferences were always looking to the generations that were emerging from graduate programs. As the first generation of graduate students and doctoral candidates became established scholars, they began to look for the next generation of scholars who would contribute to these emerging fields.

I would argue that these characteristics, which were marks of the grass roots movements of scholarship and formation from their inception, were the elements that laid the foundation for the emergence of these fields of scholarly discourse. These were the values that Kwok Pui-lan lived out in her vocation as a scholar, theological educator, and activist. Thus, when the Wabash Center for Teaching and Learning in Theology and Religion launched its first ever workshop on teaching and learning for Asian/Asian North

American Faculty in 2006, Kwok was the lead director. The overwhelming majority of both the faculty participants and the workshop leaders were regular members of APARRI. In this way, the workshop became an extension of this emerging field into the area of teaching and learning excellence.

Organizing and mentoring for two conference groups would be enough for any well-established career. Kwok, however, has also been one of the lead mentors for the Asian Theological Summer Institute (ATSI) since the mid-2000s. This course, organized by J. Paul Rajashekar, convenes in a seminar format and provides doctoral candidates at the dissertation-writing phase a forum in which peers and well-established senior scholars of Asian descent give extensive feedback on their projects. The result for the doctoral students is more substantive, constructive input into their dissertation than most dissertation committees offer, especially those lacking a single Asian or Asian American scholar. Because of the expertise in the room, students are able to fine-tune their dissertations, improving them so that they can make a substantive and unique contribution to their fields. Through this program, Kwok Pui-lan has made significant impact on hundreds of scholars during the critical years of their scholarly formation. She wrote about her experience of ATSI in a blog post: "I wish I had such a seminar when I began. It has been a privilege to be able to accompany many of these students and play a small part in their journeys."² In these closing sentences, she exemplifies her style of mentorship. What she did not have herself as an emerging postcolonial, Asian feminist theologian, she cultivates for others. This is not just about her imprint on a generation of scholars but also about her accompaniment on these scholars' journeys in finding their own scholarly voices. Her reflection is also an example of how she embodies her authority—unsurpassed expertise that works alongside others with humility.

A festschrift honors the work of a person who has distinguished herself among her peers. It is like a banquet in which those gathered, one after the other, toast the person being celebrated. These essays are the toasts, words of gratitude and honor given to

² Kwok Pui-lan, "Asian Theological Summer Institute," *Kwok Pui-lan: On Postcolonialism, theology, and everything she cares about* (blog), June 6, 2013, <http://kwokpui-lan.blogspot.com/2013/06/asian-theological-summer-institute.html>.

the person of distinction along with generous gifts of scholarship in chapters that exemplify Kwok's values of excellence within religious academic disciplines, interdisciplinary scholarship, postcolonial critiques of Western ways of thinking, and Asian and Asian North American experiences. These gifts of commendation could not be more deserved. Kwok has been recognized as the preeminent postcolonial feminist scholar of her generation in many venues, including her election as president of the American Academy of Religion in 2011, only the second Asian woman and woman of color so honored. However, the accolades go beyond her scholarship to her teaching excellence. She has received many awards and distinctions for her creative and imaginative teaching. In the same way that she has encouraged emerging scholars to find their voice, she has also mentored just as many through workshops on teaching excellence through the Wabash Center, while also impacting generations of leaders in faith communities through her creative and liberating teaching practice as a theological educator. My own small contribution to this volume emphasizes a third area in which she has left a lasting legacy on theological and religious scholarship—her role as a mentor and organizer that has led to the emergence of new fields of scholarly discourse that are transforming theological education.

It would be a significant accomplishment for a single person to make such a substantial impact in any one of these three areas—scholarship, teaching, mentoring/organizing for a new field. Not only has Kwok Pui-lan been a leader in these three areas, she has also been recognized as achieving the highest levels of excellence in them. This is why it is not an overstatement to say that in her work and legacy, Kwok embodies the best of what it means to be a theological educator for the twenty-first century. Moreover, when one considers the current state of Christianity in North America, one could argue that Kwok's scholarship and vocation as a theological educator represents the future of theological and religious scholarship. In its de-centering of white, Eurocentric normativity, and in its advocacy for the power that resides in communities on the margins, Kwok's scholarship captures the moment in late twentieth and early twenty-first century religious intellectual thought.

For decades, contemporary missiologists have discussed how the vitality of the church has migrated to the Global South. Theological education will inevitably follow where the *missio Dei* is

thriving. How these contexts and sources of knowledge will change the nature of theological scholarship is still developing. However, it is clear that those of us in North America are no longer at the center of global religious life and thought. In fact, we likely have never been. Throughout her career, Kwok has pointed us in the direction of where we are heading, and I hope that the values that have characterized her scholarship, teaching, and community-building will lead us as we work toward the future through the simultaneous process of de-centering and reclaiming the margins in religious life and thought.

What gives me hope about the future of theological education is that we do not move into this future alone. From my experience of Kwok's influence as a mentor and organizer, the most significant impact of her legacy will not only be in the excellence of her scholarship and teaching, but also in the hundreds if not thousands of scholars and leaders upon whom she has had made a lasting imprint. The apostle Paul said it this way, "You yourselves are our letter, written on our hearts, to be known and read by all . . . written not with ink but with the Spirit of the living God, not on tablets of stone but on tablets of human hearts" (2 Cor 3:2-3). It is these living letters, legacies of the heart, that Kwok Pui Lan provides as pathways to the future for theological education and religious scholarship. For that reason, I join the resounding chorus of the cloud of witnesses who honor and give thanks for her and the stunning legacy she continues to leave on theological and religious scholarship.

